

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
 'Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.
 Every valley shall be filled,
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
 and the crooked shall be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

As Christians, December and Advent form an interesting juxtaposition. You know it well. On one hand, we are busily preparing for the celebration of Christmas with family and friends. Maybe less, compared to 2019 and earlier, but I bet you still have a to-do list. On the other hand, our faith tradition instructs us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus. So right when things are ramping up in our December busyness, John the Baptist enters our Gospel today shouting, "Hey, we have an emergency here! Everything needs to change! Mountains, valleys, rocky twisted roads...the whole terrain needs to change." What do we do with that? And who has time for major renovations in December?

In the wilderness, God has inspired John to retell the words once told through the prophet Isaiah. The words spoke of a flattened, smooth terrain that gave hope of new life for the Jewish people. A hope to journey home to Jerusalem after captivity in Babylon. In our Gospel, just a few hundred years later, John is speaking directly to the people who are captive again but in their own land under the Romans. Both Isaiah and John may have spoken their words centuries ago, but the passage becomes especially vivid to us when we consider what the images meant to people back then. Back in olden times, as my grandmother would say, when a ruler wanted to tour his lands, a courier was sent forth to tell all the inhabitants to get the roads ready. To get the terrain cleared, leveled and smoothed for the king who would soon be coming. John is that

courier for Jesus. He knows that God is bringing great change for the people again. He's telling the people to get ready for a new life that is coming through a new king. But he isn't calling for some outward cosmetic touchup of the roads. Instead, he's calling for repentance, changes to the *inner* terrain of the people. To turn away from sin and back toward God, to ask for forgiveness and to be prepared for the new kind of world that he believes is coming.

What does that mean for our lives and the roads we travel carrying our own inner terrain today? My sense is that in times when we have turned away from God, some false mountains and false valleys have developed in our hearts. High mountains possibly of arrogance, selfishness, resentment or judgment. Shadowed valleys possibly of doubt, fear, a sense of being powerless or of being alone. Such false things keep our face turned from God. Such false things also keep us divided from one another.

The voice of the courier is asking us to turn toward God to level our mountains and fill our valleys. To send all that false belief up to God to dispose of and to ask God to smooth the roads of our lives with the certain knowledge of who we are and whose we are: God's children called to service, reconciliation, justice and love. In essence, by turning to God we are turning toward our true selves. By turning to God, we are accepting God's invitation to remove the barriers between us and God and each other, to take part in God's plan for new life for all people. Once the inner renovation starts, you may find yourself surrounded by other like-minded people on the same road. Then fasten your seat belt, because changes may come on very quickly! I wonder if you have experienced this already in your life as a Christian.

God works in ways visible and invisible to humankind. But here is where I see God at work and it's where I find hope. I believe that the changes manifested in our inner lives will ultimately manifest in our collective outer lives. They will migrate into our communities, our culture, and our institutions as we turn toward God. For one thing we know is certain: mountains will fall, valleys will be raised, roads will be straightened and smoothed. The work begun in Christ will come to completion, because it is God's will that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

God is inviting us to be a part of forming this future. If we truly believe this, then we have every reason to respond to everything on our life journey with confidence and certainty. But the first step is to listen to John and turn away from falsehoods and turn toward God. If Advent is a time of waiting, maybe it is God who is waiting on us.

So instead of juxtaposing December and Advent, of course we bring them together. As you are preparing your Christmas things, I challenge you to imagine that John the Baptist is, maybe not up in your face, but walking near you and shouting out some deeply personal questions for you to ponder. Within you, what mountains and valleys and rocky roads need some leveling? What is keeping your face turned from God? Who is your true self as God intended you to be? How will you say yes to God's invitation to join God's work for all people? Your answers are a way you can prepare your heart for Jesus this Advent season and for always.