

Second Sunday in Advent

Dec. 6, 2015

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Gospel Text: Luke 3:1-6

I knew what it was immediately upon its waking me up, long before my alarm was set to go off one morning last spring. It was the unmistakable sound of heavy equipment being unloaded and preparing to do some serious work in my neighborhood. The ground was shaking, my windows were rattling and the less-than-pleasing “beep, beep, beep” of the reverse warning alarms was drowning out any of the usual morning song of the birds. The rumble of diesel engines and that “beep, beep, beep” quickly became the soundtrack to my summer as a 3 mile stretch of Montana State highway 78 was removed, realigned and replaced during this year’s construction season.

Years ago, some engineers at the Montana Highway Department determined that the s-curves in this section of Hwy 78 were just too dangerous. We knew the work was coming because the surveyors had been out there every summer for several years, staking out the new route with bright orange paint, flags and streamers. The utility companies had also come through and relocated the power and telephone lines. Then, as soon as the ground thawed this spring, the heavy equipment showed up, seriously heavy equipment, seriously heavy earth-moving equipment. Announcing its presence was that diesel rumble and the “beep, beep, beep.”

“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.” (Lk 3:5)

There are times that I hear John’s announcement of the Lord’s coming, and I’m comforted. If the Lord has the power to move mountains, then this is a Lord ready to take on the greatest challenges before us. There is plenty that’s far from straight in this world, and John’s proclamation suggests things are about to get set right once more.

But for some reason today when I read these words from Luke, all I hear is “beep, beep, beep.” I’m reminded of the helplessness I felt all summer long, wondering if the work would ever be done, if the diesel engines would ever be loaded up and hauled away. The voice that’s coming from the wilderness cries out “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” That’s a charge, not a suggestion or a statement of fact. Prepare, make, these are commands to act, not a declaration that someone else is coming through to do the work. I’m not being asked to stand by and watch, I’m being told to pick up a shovel. Or in this case, jump into the cab of a seriously heavy piece of earth-moving equipment. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” “Beep, beep, beep.”

If you’re excited for Jesus to come, for God to come, then John the Baptizer’s presence here is good news indeed. The prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, they all told us that before the Lord arrives on the scene, one would come, like John the Baptizer, a voice from the wilderness, proclaiming the imminent arrival of the savior of the world, waking us up from our dreamy slumber. The prophets mediate the very voice of God. The

prophets told us one like John was to come and now he's here. The savior of the world is coming. People get ready. Good news indeed.

It's interesting that Luke, the author of our Gospel, gives as much if not even more attention to the birth of John the Baptist as he does to the birth of Jesus the Savior in his narrative. Unlike the other three evangelists, Luke's dedication to John the Baptist's early story underscores his importance and elevates his prophetic role for us, the hearers of the story and today's target audience. Luke cries out along with the baptizer. If you want to know the truth about God, then pay attention!

Last week, we spent some time acknowledging that there are cracks that run through everything. We find those cracks in our abilities, our relationships, our environments. But the cracks can't contain light. And that's God's way of shining into our lives. Once we admit the cracks exist, we're incapable of keeping the light from shining through.

The Advent truth we proclaim, that we hope to grab ahold of is that God's light breaks into the darkness. God's light shines right through the very things that can keep us apart, disconnected and lost.

So, God's light shines. And as it does, it also *shows us the way*. Earlier this week, I shared a simple analogy of how the light of a flashlight or a headlamp, makes possible a backcountry hike in the darkness. Without some illumination, an uneven path becomes impassible, fraught with risk, treacherous. The light reveals the way while it points out dangers and pitfalls. Without the light, we may make our way but certainly not without considerable stumbling and doubt as to ever arriving at our destination.

The light shining through the cracks of our lives has this capacity too. It orients us in the right direction, it keeps us from stumbling, it delivers us where we need to go. As analogies go, this one seems pleasant enough and fits the simpler narrative of our advent hopes. "All will see the salvation of God," proclaims John in response today.

But sometimes the light isn't a flashlight or a headlamp, gently lighting the way as we wander along. Sometimes the light is a 3000-watt mercury vapor work light running off a diesel generator and illuminating a stretch of highway that's been torn up and is trying to get rebuilt, even in the middle of the night. "Beep, beep, beep."

Luke tells us that John's proclamations were *primarily* about repentance and this is where the light of this Gospel seems to be pointing us. Though "to repent" in Greek simply means, "to turn or to change direction," John's baptism of repentance seems to be anything but simple. For John, to repent requires a response to his charge of pathway straightening activities. Valleys are to be filled, mountains are to be made low, crooked made straight, rough made smooth. Clearly, repentance is on a scale comparable to remaking creation itself.

So takeaway number one: **the way** that's being shown to us **is difficult**. Earth-moving difficult. This sort of makes sense to me when I consider all that we need to turn from, all the places it seems where we're headed in the wrong direction. It's been over 50 years since the civil rights act was passed in America and yet racial justice seems further out

of reach than at any other point in my lifetime. In response to September 11, this country went to war in part to bring security to our homeland and yet today it feels even less secure than it ever has. The gap between the rich and the poor is as broad as it's ever been in modern history. I can't even get my arms wrapped around all the senseless gun violence that only seems to be getting more and more common.

These are big problems. These are mountain-sized problems. These problems carve canyon-deep valleys. How does the God of all salvation come in the face of such an uneven landscape?

But the prophet calls us to repent, not to solve. If repent means turn, then perhaps all we need to do is to start moving in a new direction. Takeaway number two: **the way** that's being shown to us **is different** than the one we're on. In order for salvation to come, perhaps all we need to change is our orientation. This also makes sense to me. When I consider these mountain-sized earth-moving challenges, I can easily be convinced that we're stuck moving in the wrong direction. Too many of these giant problems are propped up by our own stubbornness and inability to consider alternatives. Our perceptions of differences embedded in the human story, perceptions like skin color, worship practice, gender identity, and so on, these perceptions shield us from the bonds that we were created to have and should draw us closer together rather than push us further apart. Do we have the strength to consider that our most fervently held perceptions are indeed the greatest of all misperceptions? The way is hard but the way must be different as well.

So if we answer the prophet's charge to repent and can turn away from our deepest and tallest misperceptions perhaps this is exactly what the light needs to accomplish its work. Takeaway number three: **the way is about possibility**. Knock down a mountain, fill in a valley, even just a little bit and something starts to happen. What once seemed truly impossible, no longer holds its debilitating stranglehold on us. Turn, just turn. Acknowledge that what we're currently doing, isn't working. Admit that long held beliefs may not actually hold truths. Consider that the old way has piled up too many false assumptions, stacked into a precarious foundation that needs to be torn down and filled in again. This is serious earth-moving work and it's worth doing. The way is hard, but consider a different path and experience the possibility that what was once an impenetrable valley or an insurmountable mountain is now ground that can sustain the Kingdom of God. Move some earth. Salvation for all, John is here to announce, depends on it.

Does God still speak through prophets to show us the way? Where are the prophets that encourage us to turn? Are there voices in our midst prophetic enough to inspire us to do some serious earth-moving? Perhaps they're all around us and we need to open our ears and our eyes.

“We should seek not a world where the black race and the white race live in harmony but a world where the terms black and white have no real political meaning.”

-Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*.

Mr. Coates is all too keenly aware that our perceptions are rooted in falsely constructed origin stories. Yes, it's hard to let go. The way is difficult.

“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”

-Malala Yousafzai

Malala has a proposition: the best way to fight religious extremism is through education and empowerment of young people. That seems like a direction worth trying. The way is different.

“We believe all lives have equal value... Our society has an obligation to invest now to improve the lives of all those coming into this world, not just those already here.

-Priscilla Chan & Mark Zuckerberg

Making a commitment to donate 99% of their fortune, the Zuckerbergs have crafted a different way of seeing the world, one that's deeply connected and co-dependent. We wonder together if others will follow their lead. The way is about possibility.

Does God still speak through prophets? I don't know for certain but I believe that God can still be heard. There are some seriously crooked places in this world, plenty of rough places in need of smoothing out. There are still deep valleys and mountains standing tall. This advent, let's open our ears to the call of the prophets. Let's open our eyes to the light as it streams through the cracks of everything that is broken. We've got some earth that needs to be moved. Don't just stand there and never mind about that shovel, you're being called to jump into the cab of a seriously heavy piece of earth-moving equipment. Feel the rumble. Listen for that alarm “beep, beep, beep.”

Amen.