

December 6, 2009

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.'"

Sermon – Susi Kawolics

As many of you know, my cousin and her husband from Switzerland came to visit and stay with me a few weeks ago. As a gift, they brought me a book entitled "I'm off then!" by a famous German comedian, Hape Kerkeling. I have been reading this book while preparing the sermon for this week. It is a journal by the author, who, after dealing with two medical emergencies, decided he needed to take a break. As he was looking for books on various travel destinations, one in particular caught his eye – "The Joy of the Camino de Santiago." The "Camino de Santiago" is a pilgrimage to the grave of Saint James, located in Spain. Intrigued by the title, Kerkeling decided he would try this pilgrimage as his getaway– hiking 12 to 18 miles per day for 35 days across France and Spain. As he wrote about hiking up and down mountains, and across flat land, his reflections paralleled the reading in today's gospel. We hear about John the Baptist proclaiming: – '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.'

Although Hape, the author of the book I'm reading, is not particularly religious, he shares that he was on a quest for God. He also was searching for himself in this adventure. Although he has a guidebook with the pathways of the pilgrimage marked, they are often not very straight, and not very visible. His adventures and misadventures lead him to profound insights, as well as a deeper relationship with God, and new understandings of himself. Some of his reflections help us in delving deeper into the scripture for today.

When we think about our own lives and making our way to God, we often have the impression that we only have to make a one time decision. Some of us may feel that once we commit our lives to God, we are on the right path, and the way is straight and easy. But Hape observes this about his pilgrimage: He writes "Actually I begin my pilgrimage anew each day. I don't feel as though I'm on one continuous journey, but rather on a thousand short trips. Every day I have to fire myself up all over again." So it is with us. Every day we have the chance to recommit to our journey. We have the chance to start over. Each day requires a recommitment to God, to following God's way instead of our own. John proclaimed a message of repentance. Repentance, or conversion, is not a "once and for all" one time event. Each day, we are called to look at our lives, and let go of that which would keep us from God. Each day, we start our journeys afresh, asking God to lead us.

In his book, Kerkeling gives us a further insight when he quotes another pilgrim he met on the path. He shares that because they have to carry all their belongings in a backpack all along the way, most walkers only have with them only one set of clothes. His fellow-traveler notices that she has stopped taking photographs of herself because she is always wearing the same clothing and always looks the same. She goes on to say "It's funny, at home you look different on the outside with each new day, yet on the inside you stay virtually the same. Here you're always the same on the outside, but on the inside you change by the hour." I see this statement as a description of the repentance John was talking about – it is the willingness to change on the inside, to want to follow closer and closer the ways of God.

Changing on the inside can mean various things. First of all, we can see it as metaphorically removing mountains, leveling valleys, and doing general road repair on the path to God. This is what John calls us to – the making straight of the crooked, the smoothing of the rough ways. Taking down the mountains and filling up valleys within us sounds like a lot of work. But the good news is that we don't do this alone. God has already done a major part of the work by making the mountain low. Mountain tops in ancient times were seen as the closest place to God. God was perceived as being in heaven, and with no airplanes or any other means of flying, the closest one could get to God was by climbing to the top of the highest mountain. That is why the preferred sites of worship were on these summits. All religions at that time competed for the high geographical places – the one the furthest up triumphed over the other religions. But we worship a God who is not found atop a mountain, but rather one who came to earth to dwell among us. God so desired to become one with us, God so wanted communion with us, that God was willing to become one of us. The incarnation is the pivotal event of God being as close to us as possible. God has completely leveled this mountain.

But sometimes we need to do our own leveling. One of our biggest blocks is the mound of unforgiveness that keeps us from fully experiencing God's presence in our lives. That roadblock can come in different forms, that of not forgiving others, not forgiving ourselves, or not forgiving God. I love the definition of forgiveness as "giving up all hope of a better past," because truly, whether we forgive or not, we will not change the past. Perhaps realizing this is the first step. But even so, sometimes forgiveness seems impossible. We try and we try, but despite our best efforts, we still wake up each new day with the same resentments towards another person, the same blaming of ourselves, the same anger at God. But I believe that God honors even our intention, our desire to forgive. I picture God next to us, with a shovel, working beside us to take down the seemingly sky-high mound of unforgiveness in our lives.

But unforgiveness is not the only obstacle in our path. Another roadblock may be our unwillingness to let go of what we see as the destination in our life. When I was attending graduate school, one of my favorite theology professors often used the phrase "God writes straight with crooked lines." I take great comfort in the assurance that, although my life has taken many unexpected, unpredictable, and sometimes unwelcome, twists and turns, that I have nevertheless constantly been led by God. It is often only by looking back that I can see that the path, although seeming to me extremely crooked, was actually the best way to get to where I needed to be. This crooked line was God's idea of writing straight.

This Advent journey prepares us for the coming of Christ into the various paths of our lives, even when they may not lead us to where we were planning to go. There are times when we prepare ourselves for a certain destination, trying to make our way

directly there, and then we end up somewhere we never expected to be. Things turn out differently than we'd hoped or planned.

But perhaps the point is that we let go of the expectations of what we're preparing for. We know that God is with us in it all, no matter what happens. Look at John the Baptist, and at Jesus. People followed them, listened to them, and expected great things from them. And in the end, they both died tragically – John beheaded, Jesus hung on a cross as a criminal. People who had followed them had to have felt shocked, angry, disappointed, betrayed. Yet we now know the ultimate ending. We can take the long view. In the end, we see that God has been with us all the time, that God has come even closer to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Often when we look back, we can see God's presence most clearly in our tragedies, disappointments and hurts.

When we are willing to repent, to let go of our preconceived ideas of where we should be, we begin to walk towards God. And the good news is that God meets us on the road, just like the father in the story of the prodigal son. As soon as we make the first move towards coming home to God, towards taking down a roadblock, God is already halfway down the path waiting for us and welcoming us.

And today we have another way God comes to us, in this sacrament of Communion. Jesus chose a way to remind us of his closeness to us, of his desire to remove all the mountains and valleys that stand between us. In this simple, sacred meal, we take food for the journey, no matter where it leads us. We rejoice in a God who so willingly, so freely comes to meet us right where we are, and we pray for the roadblocks in our own hearts to begin to break down, so that we may more clearly see Jesus in all the experiences of our lives.