

December 6, 2015
2nd Sunday of Advent (Yr. C)
Luke 3:1-6
The Rev. Carenda Baker

“SO, HOW ARE THE ROADS?”, my mother asked when I would arrive in Gardners to visit my parents after driving eastward 4 hours from Pittsburgh, mostly by way of the PA Turnpike. Well, there was construction in several places, so I had to drive through those narrow barriers, “cattle chutes” like Dad calls them. And of course I hit snow in Somerset, the highest point of elevation along the PA Turnpike. You can pretty much count on hitting snow or ice in Somerset from late fall to early spring. “How are the roads?” With my commute now from Carlisle to Chambersburg, I find myself asking that a lot, travelling usually by Interstate 81. Road conditions are a crucial factor if you hope to arrive at your intended destination.

This question makes for good Advent reflection. How is the road? How is it on the road leading to and from your heart? Is the road in decent enough condition that a VIP could make his way without encountering too many detours, finding the road blocked, in ill-repair, or even impassable?

Today we heard about one of the main characters we meet every year in the gospel readings for Advent, John the Baptist. He is the last major prophet to appear in the Bible. John is the hinge between the “old way” of living in covenant relationship with God guided by God’s law, and the “new way” of relating to God through directly following Jesus. John is the forerunner, the one sent to prepare the way for Jesus’ coming. Here’s how Luke describes John the Baptist’s job: ***“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.’”*** John was the messenger sent to help get the road and the people ready for God’s coming Messiah.

In ancient civilizations it was a major undertaking to prepare the way for a royal dignitary coming to visit. Whatever the terrain, it required skill and well-reasoned engineering, and lots of manpower. Think about it. Ancient peoples had no bulldozers or other earth moving equipment. No easy way to uproot and remove trees that needed to be moved. No dynamite to blast through mountains and break up underlying rock or stone. No dump trucks to fill in ruts with tons of dirt and gravel. No asphalt pavers, to pour out layer upon layer of hot asphalt to create a smooth and level surface, smooth enough that a chariot and horses could be driven on it safely.

Highway building has always been a huge undertaking. It still is today, especially because increasingly we live in such rough, uncertain and unstable terrain – socially, economically, technologically, ecologically, religiously. This is the main reason it is so

necessary that as Christians we seriously engage in keeping Advent well. This world God loves so much needs us to observe Advent well. We are called to hold the place of faith, and hope, and expectation of good things yet to come.

But we are also called to relax and breathe, because God is the one who is responsible for building the highway that will bring God to us. A highway of righteousness and peace. Just a note about that heavyweight Biblical word “righteousness”. I know that you heard about righteousness last week from Deacon Pete. Here’s another little clue about that word. It is accurate and appropriate every time you read or hear the word righteousness, to translate it in your mind to read “*RIGHT RELATIONSHIP*”. To be righteous is to be in “right relationship”, to live in right relationship with ourselves, with God, with others, and with all creation.

So I’m thinking this highway construction business is every bit a real God-sized job! This is the time to look around you, and look within your own heart. Are there mountains and hills that need leveling – places of inflated pride and overconfident self-sufficiency, places overrun by the idolatry of independence? Some of those mountains are becoming evident this week in Paris, as representatives from nearly 200 countries have been gathered at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This Conference of Parties is meeting to craft an international agreement to mitigate the impact of our changing climate. They hope to shape an agreement that will be fair and just. The deliberations are complex and focus intently on money, power, intellectual resources, political will, and what it means to be a “developed” or “developing” country. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has sent an Episcopal delegation to be a visible and active prayerful presence during these negotiations. I’ve been praying that those looming mountains of self-interest and aggressive self-advancement will somehow be leveled by the power of God, so that all nations will commit to contributing significantly for the common good and saving the God-given life of our planet.

And then there are valleys that desperately need to be lifted up, filled in – places which need to be strengthened by hope, sustained in faith, nurtured and nourished by love. Those places in us and in our world that are broken and beaten down, that need compassion and healing. Places that need the touch of tenderness, as Pope Francis has pleaded. Places of grief and loss and emptiness, of wounding and isolation. Places of loneliness.

Do you imagine there might be some rough places that need their sharp edges sanded down to smoothness? Harbored feelings of anger or bitterness, or continuing to live with a spirit that will not consider offering forgiveness to one who has caused us pain. There are so many rough places in our world which are fueled by fear. And fear can easily take over and consume us, leaving us feeling helpless and paralyzed.

And then, we know all too well that there are so many skewed and crooked places that need mighty doses of God’s power and transforming love to straighten them out: greed, consumerism, poverty, violence, racism, oppression, terrorism, homelessness.

It's a strange paradox, this relationship between humankind and God, because as priest and educator John Westerhoff writes, the reality is that "we can do nothing without God's help, and God will do nothing without ours".

God's Spirit is already moving to prepare the highway of our hearts. Our part is to be open, receptive to the Spirit's movement.

So relax. Breathe. You don't need to add one more thing to your "to do" list this Advent. What we really need is less doing and more BE-ING.

Being – in prayer, listening. Being still enough to experience God's presence and unconditional love. Being malleable, with spirits humble and willing to cooperate with the reconstruction work God needs to do in us to prepare us for the royal coming.

Here, today friends, God comes to us. In Word. In silence. In music. In prayer. In anointing oil. In bread and wine. In the touch and smile of another. We're on this Advent journey together in good company. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Patiently expecting the unanticipated good things yet to come.

HOW IS THE ROAD? Look in your heart. God will show you, because as the prophet said, we ARE all destined to "see the salvation of God." Amen.

