

Luke 3:1-6

The beginning of our gospel reading places us in a particular time and place. We know who the bosses are, who is in power, but we are in the desert, on the edge, in the Jordon river, the place of crossing over, a place to meet God, and John is urgently calling us to turn again, to take action, to be washed, to repent, to be forgiven, to prepare for the immanent coming of none other than God! This is a place and a time to meet God. John quotes an earlier prophet to etch his point deeply.. Prepare! Get ready! All of you are welcome, but don't muck around, get onto it.. our secular world might give a similar message about urgency, but they would be urging us to spend money..John is saying, get ready to meet God. How do we do that? We are here now, aren't we? How do we do this?

I share with you some reflections from Jan Richardson today. She writes:

'In his book *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue... says,

For years I have had an idea for a short story about a world where you would approach only one person in the course of your life. Naturally, one would have to subtract biological considerations from this assumption in order to draw this imaginary world. You would have to practice years of silence before the mystery of presence in the Other, then you could begin to approach.

Richardson writes: 'I'm taken with O'Donohue's notion that to approach another person is an act of reverence that requires preparation. Most of us cross paths with so many people in the course of our life that we often forget that to encounter someone, to truly meet another, is a sacred act. Given how very many of us there are on this planet, and how frequently we allow the image of God in us to become obscured, it's easy to overlook the way in which coming into the presence of another—a being who is created in the likeness of God—is a sacrament and a wonder.

This week, John the Baptist, along with his predecessor Isaiah, has been calling me to remember what it means to prepare to encounter another: in this case, of course, to come into the presence of one

who is not just created in the image of God but who **is** God. In describing what the Baptist has come to do, Luke evokes the potent words of Isaiah, words that are full of an ancient hope for one who will come to restore and redeem:

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.'*

One can imagine that John the Baptist, this locusts-and-wild-honey-eating, camel's-hair-wearing prophet, must have spent his own time of preparation in the wilderness before he began to call people to prepare for the one who was coming. It was only by making himself ready—by straightening the paths within himself and smoothing out all that was rough in his interior landscape—that John was able to do the work that God had called him to do. And so we, too, are called in this season: to attend to and prepare our inner terrain so that we may welcome Christ in our lives and in our world.

But I have to tell you: this vision of straight paths, filled valleys, and mountains and hills levelled out—it rather gives me the willies. What Isaiah describes, and what John the Baptist is testifying to and working for, is a world that has undergone an apocalyptic levelling out. (Even Sale is not that flat!) What will be left, it seems, is a landscape marked by little but its even, unrelenting flatness.

I wonder at that, because I think that part of what God loves about us is the stuff that makes us complicated and complex—the things that give texture to our terrain. By and large, we humans are not simple, are not smooth going, do not make things easy. I have a hunch that God takes a shine to us because of this: God likes a good challenge. And so the prospect of a landscape that is uncomplicated, that is flat, that does not have any meandering paths that take me to places I had never imagined going yet where I find God nonetheless: this strikes me less as a heavenly vision than a vision of a place far removed from paradise.

And yet. And yet. As one who not infrequently is prone to making my life more complicated than it needs to be, I find myself pondering Isaiah's words, and pondering them again. In this season of preparation, Isaiah and John challenge me to consider:
amidst the complexities and complications of my life,
is there something I need to do to make it easier for Christ to enter my terrain and to be known in this world?
Is there some path through my soul that I need to straighten, to smooth?
Is there some mountainous obstacle that needs to be brought down—not to flatten my soul into a stultifying sameness, but so that Christ may meet less resistance within me?
It may be tempting to think that we should prepare ourselves more strenuously to encounter and welcome Christ than to meet anyone else. This season, however, beckons us to remember that the incarnation takes place anew each day, and that Christ comes in the form of those whom we meet on our path.
How are we preparing ourselves to encounter Christ in them?
How do we ready ourselves for this sacrament, this mystery, this miracle?
Amid the graced and necessary complexities involved in being who God has created and called us to be, how do we make a space for the One who desires to approach and meet us in this and every season?'¹

Jan Richardson offers a poem entitled 'Prepare':

Strange how one word
will so hollow you out.
But this word
has been in the wilderness
for months.
Years.
This word is what remained
after everything else
was worn away
by sand and stone.

¹ <http://adventdoor.com/2012/12/05/advent-2-prepare/>

It is what withstood
the glaring of sun by day,
the weeping loneliness of
the moon at night.
Now it comes to you
racing out of the wild
eyes blazing
and waving its arms,
its voice ragged with desert
but piercing and loud
as it speaks itself
again and again.
Prepare, prepare.
It may feel like
the word is levelling you
emptying you
as it asks you
to give up
what you have known.
It is impolite
and hardly tame
but when it falls
upon your lips
you will wonder
at the sweetness
like honey
that finds its way
into the hunger
you had not known
was there.²

² <http://adventdoor.com/2012/12/05/advent-2-prepare/>