

Mountains and more mountains: Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

December 1, 2009

Our guide assured us that it wasn't very far, only about 15 minutes or so up the road. Maybe 20. We were on our way to Bassin-Bleu, one of Haiti's most magnificent waterfalls. The sight of it, said our guide, would take our breath away. It was early in the morning. We filled up our water bottles, lathered up with sunscreen, topped it off with insect repellent, laced up our hiking boots and hit the trail.

I settled into a good Haitian pace (which proved to be much faster than the sluggish American pace I was used to), and after about an hour of hiking up the steep mountainside, I asked our guide as politely as I could, "Are we getting close? Are we almost there?"

He assured me that the falls weren't very far, only about 15 minutes or so up the mountain. Maybe 20, he said, and smiled sincerely.

Two hours later, with no waterfall in sight, my lungs were burning, my feet were blistered, my water bottle was bone dry. I couldn't go any further—even though our guide insisted that the falls weren't very far now, only about 15 more minutes. I sat down with my back against a tree, totally spent.

That's when I saw the woman who had been walking some distance behind us with a basket of 20 or 30 pounds of oranges balanced carefully on her head. She smiled when she saw me, gracefully swung the basket down into her arms and sat down. Then she cut one of her oranges in two, handed me half and said, "We have a saying in Haiti: After mountains, more mountains."

It's true: the life expectancy for a Haitian man is 55 years of age. Haitian women are 60 times more at risk of dying in childbirth than American women, and three out of every 50 babies born in Haiti do not live long enough to take their first steps.

In the early 1990s, my father was the executive director of an inner-city food bank. For seven years he waged war on poverty with cornflakes and powdered milk. For seven years he packed grocery bag after grocery bag, held fund-raiser after fund-raiser and preached in pulpit after pulpit, doing all he could to make straight a path

for God's generosity to march into the world. Yet after seven years the city was as hungry as it was when he began. He says now that he waged war on poverty—and lost.

After mountains, more mountains. After hunger, more hunger. It's enough to make you spend the rest of this Advent season curled up in Baruch's "garment of sorrow and affliction."

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee . . ." Luke's royal rhetoric prepares the reader for yet another imperial milestone, but then the gears shift abruptly: "the Word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Luke drives us from the opulent courtyards of the elite out into the desert—out into the wilderness where slaves flee to freedom, where God covenants with God's people and the prophet John cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight God's path!"

In this season, the prophet's cry must again become the church's cry, the proclaimed good news that finally every mountain shall be made low, "so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God."

Just as the birth of John restored the voice of his father, Zachary, so may this season of preparation restore the prophetic voice of the church. This is our work, to go out into the wilderness, to proclaim to a weary world that the hunger, the poverty, the inequity as we know it will not have the final word.

The valley of the shadow of death will be filled; it will be lifted up. The mountains of struggle, pain and poverty will be made low. God entrusts this message to the church and charges us to make it plain.

After I finished my orange, I got back up on my feet, and I was refreshed. Fifteen minutes more, I said to myself. Soon I heard the whisper of rushing water in the distance. I couldn't see Bassin-Bleu yet, but I could hear it and it sounded like justice rolling down. It sounded like God had created a world: I could make out the squeals of young children learning how to walk, the warm tones of women gossiping while washing their laundry, and the proud arguments of old men debating who was the oldest.

We don't know how far away we are from that new world, but we are called to live and to pray and to preach as if it were right around the corner—and to keep on walking. After mountains and more mountains we will come up over a rise and catch sight of that mighty waterfall, and it will take our breath away.