

December 6, Second Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:1-6

November 24, 2015

One of my dad's most treasured Christmas gifts is his portable Global Positioning System device. He has come to believe in his GPS device, and he constantly evangelizes the rest of us about our need to get one. Even if he knows exactly where he's going, you probably won't see him driving without his destination locked in and his route highlighted. He even uses it when he goes on walks.

I have a love-hate relationship with GPS. While I appreciate its direction and its knowledge of routes that aren't familiar to me, I dislike the way it corrects me. The "lady" in the machine seems to get a bit snippy when I don't go where she tells me to and she's forced to recalculate my route. After perceiving that condescension in her voice a few too many times—I often think I know a better route than she does—I'm ready to throw her out the driver-side window.

Sometimes I think direction is an easier pill to swallow than correction. It takes a measure of humility to allow someone to tell you what to do. Being corrected by someone is like being told what to do twice. Or three times.

This week's Gospel reading almost sounds like we're in Lent. John the Baptist proclaims a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance, sins—don't we focus on these things during Lent? Isn't Advent about beauty rather than ashes? Aren't we looking forward to the arrival of the Christ with hopeful anticipation, rather than weighing down our spirits with the realization of how screwed up we are?

It's important to remember that the news of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is good news. It's good news to sinners—those suffering the consequences of their transgressions, those living with the guilt of hearts they have broken by their callousness, those left to clean up the mess they have made of their life by their poor choices, those who have succumbed to greed and ruined others' lives along with perhaps their own. For those of us who have squandered countless opportunities to get it right, those of us who have fallen off the wagon, and those of us who have been told that we're too tainted to be redeemed, the news of repentance and forgiveness of sins is good news. It says we're not hopeless. We're

not relegated to lives as ne'er-do-wells.

It's also good news to those against whom others have sinned. The call to repentance is a call to those who are hurting us to cease and desist. It is a peace order of sorts—and an amnesty program. Those who have trespassed against us are being offered a chance to stop. When they take advantage of that opportunity, we find our own respite. Repentance means not just stopping the current trajectory but also turning back, addressing the damage left in one's wake, and vowing never to go down that road again. When our oppressor repents, we can be free.

In the Gospels, Jesus is criticized for hanging out with some unsavory characters—sinners, women of ill repute, tax collectors. These are the people who undermine and even tear apart the fabric of society. They violate the trust of the community—especially those awful tax collectors, who collude with the Roman government to cheat their own people and keep them in abject poverty. What bigger betrayal could there be than to help the oppressor oppress?

Jesus' critics aren't always simple, bitter nitpickers. They've been hurt by the very people Jesus keeps in close company. How would we feel if we witnessed such things? How would a victim of sexual assault feel seeing her trusted caregiver making merry with her rapist? It must seem to them like Jesus, having befriended these people, has tacitly condoned their actions.

But who better to give our enemies to than the Christ? What better chance do we have for the reversal of their hurtful course than a personal encounter with God? What better chance do they have to be convicted and corrected than for the Lord to come to them directly?

In proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John makes no distinctions between any of us. All flesh shall see the salvation of the living God. All are in the same boat. All are called to this baptism, to this repentance. We are no better than our enemies, no worse than our detractors. And that's good news.

John prepares for us the way for the Lord. Like a prophetic GPS device, he highlights not only the route for us to take but also the place for the Lord to come in, telling us when we need to make a U-turn. It can be difficult to consider that we need to make changes. But we can also choose to look at it as an opportunity for ourselves and our community. Next week, John will give us some concrete examples of how the path can be made level and straight. For now, we have our marching orders. This week's

reading offers much to consider about our culture, our community, and what the Lord's arrival means for our relationships with one another.