

Smoothing the path (Luke 3:1-6)

November 22, 2000

I cherish the vision of what could have been a great moment in American poetry. One day my American literature professor told our class about Emily Dickinson, the quiet and reclusive woman who was satisfied to live in a circumscribed world in Amherst, Massachusetts. Then he told us about Walt Whitman, the wild man of American poetry whose energy and sensuality and wide experience of the human condition were dramatically different from Emily Dickinson's.

My professor gave us two facts: the Dickinson family occasionally went to the beach for picnics; and Walt Whitman was fond of going to a beach, stripping off all of his clothes and running in the sand while yelling his poetry into the wind. My professor then said, with a mischievous smile on his face, "What if, one day at the beach, just after Emily Dickinson had finished spreading her picnic blanket on the sand, suddenly, flying over a sand dune and landing right in the middle of the Dickinson picnic, came a naked Walt Whitman. Who would have spoken first? What would that person have said? What poems would have been written by each of them afterwards? What a moment that would have been!"

The appearance of John the Baptist is like Walt Whitman landing on the beach—a wild and surprising character shouting his prophecy all over the wilderness and howling his message into the wind. He must have shocked many people even as he attracted others. Hard to go on with business as usual or concentrate on your little picnic when the Baptizer bursts onto the scene. Nothing can remain the same after he appears. Either he is crazy or he is onto something big. Or maybe both. But the world is going to be changed. The valleys will be filled and the hills will be made low. Or, as Clarence Jordan translates in his *Cotton Patch Version*: "Make a road for the Lord in the depressed areas and make it straight. Every low place shall be filled in. Every hill and high place shall be pushed down. And the curves shall be straightened out and the washboard road scraped smooth." A radical vision of a world dramatically renewed and improved. That's John's vision.

In Vermont, that vision is especially attractive. It's almost impossible to get from one town to another without going over hills and around curves. There are few long and

straight roads in the state, and after mud season, many of the dirt roads are rutted and bumpy, like giant washboards. Those hills and curves are part of the beauty and charm of Vermont, but it is frustrating to contend with them year-round, especially if there is snow or ice. It would be heavenly to be able to drive smoothly and quickly without steep inclines or sharp curves or merciless bumps.

And that is John's point. In the kingdom that is coming, the rough places will be smoothed out and the crooked ways will be made straight. But ultimately it's not highway maintenance he is talking about—it is people and culture maintenance. He is talking not about road improvement but about the creation of a world of righteousness, safety, justice and compassion, the kind of world dreamed about by poets and promised by prophets.

There is a highway in southern Vermont where many serious accidents happen because cars and trucks build up their speed descending a mountain, only to come upon a sharp curve in the road. The people living in the house near that curve keep a pile of blankets on their porch because they know there will be accidents regularly, and the victims will need to be covered while waiting for the rescue squad. Residents of the area have been petitioning the state for years to straighten the road out in order to prevent accidents and save lives. John the Baptist seems to be saying something similar—the curves of injustice, immorality and inhumanity need to be changed into smooth paths so that everyone will see God's salvation. That is God's plan, and it is not wishful thinking to proclaim it.

Who is going to do this work? It is God's work, but at the same time, it is our responsibility to join that work. That is our work of repentance. That is our harvest of righteousness. We pile up our blankets and respond to human misery, but we also do all that we can to remove the curves and injustices that cause so much suffering and pain. That is our vocation, easily forgotten amid holiday busyness and jolliness. It is serious business, all-important business—which is why John shouts at us incessantly.

As serious as this task is, though, we can still approach it with joy. Whether we express our joy quietly, as did Emily Dickinson, or exuberantly, as did Walt Whitman, we are invited to share our joy by offering our praise to God and enjoying our eucharistic picnics. And when we gather, who knows what surprises await us? That's what this season of Advent is for—to heighten our awareness of God's surprises, whether they include the surprise of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are way too old to be having a baby yet bring forth John, or the surprise years when that same John

appears in the wilderness. All of these events remind us that we can never predict when God will appear in our lives or what lies beyond that next curve or who is going to come leaping over that sand dune. We'd better be prepared.