

Second Sunday of Advent
Philippians 1:3-11; Canticle 16; Luke 3:1-6
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Last Sunday I mentioned my plan to one day, in my older age, land in a wonderful continual care facility on a mountaintop outside Charlottesville overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. I've been thinking about this facility for years as I've passed it going and returning from fishing trips to mountain streams. Old age seemed perfectly manageable, even desirable, in such a facility in that location. My future was set. When I received a packet of information from a staff person last Wednesday, I tore into it and eagerly read about all the amenities offered, such as a fitness and aquatics center, a cultural arts center for lectures and concerts, a 17-acre nature preserve with a pond and trails, a chapel, library, billiard's room, woodworking shop, art studio, raised garden beds and more. The floor plans for even the smallest Monticello apartments looked ample. It was perfect, utopian, definitely the way to go before exiting this world. Lastly, I looked at the "Fee Schedule" and the harsh winds of reality swept me off the mountaintop. That dream was surely beyond our reach. We, like most, will have to continue to live into an unknown and unpredictable future.

Advent is the season to face dashed dreams, disillusionment, discontent, devastation and disquietude in our lives, for it is a season of hope. Knowing that Jesus once came into our world as God with us, we anticipate his return over and over. Luke's gospel names seven VIP's who were the rich and powerful policymakers at that time. Tiberius -- Emperor, Pontius Pilate -- Governor, Herod, Philip and Lysanius -- Rulers, Annas and Caiphas -- high priests. These guys called the shots. Yet Luke tells us that "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness."

John didn't live in the lap of luxury or have servants at this beck and call. He didn't command armies or enact laws for the little people to obey or else. John lived in a cave, wore animal skins and ate insects. He was primitive in every respect except his zeal to know God and to be God's servant. When his world was under the heavy hand of competent and efficient authorities, he came roaring out of the backwoods to enliven the desolate masses. His orders are to repent; his weapon is the water of baptism. To a people worn down and worn out by years of oppression and disappointment, John is food after famine, rain after drought. He is a voice crying in the wilderness: Your God is coming at last, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." John comes to us in Advent announcing the arrival of God, our only hope.

The people in power don't notice another backwater preacher because they don't frequent barren places nor are they the least bit interested in change. They've got the world ordered to their satisfaction. But people who know that all is not well, who live daily with want and emptiness within, are eager for a new world order. They flock to John.

We don't repent out of fear but out of a desire for much-needed change in our lives and in the world. Unless you're Tiger Woods. He may well be repenting out of fear. He got

caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Even if he knew he was on the wrong road with his extramarital affairs, he didn't have the good sense to turn back before it was too late. All his talent, fame and fortune couldn't overcome his lack of judgment.

A Turkish proverb warns, "No matter how far you have gone on a wrong road, turn back." Most of us don't need total overhauls. More often we need adjustment and modifications. We get distracted by or attracted to something, someone or some idea that pulls and tugs on us in unhelpful and unhealthy ways. We get slightly off the road of fully attending to the people and needs that we're already committed to. We may start to live in an imaginary or dream world not rooted in reality.

I could have become dissatisfied and even resentful of my present situation if I yearned for the utopia I envisioned in a resplendent retirement community. Living for the future, however, is no way to live in the present. As I've said before, all we have is today. Right now are the challenges, opportunities and blessings that make life worth living.

The message that John came to deliver to an unhappy and disconsolate people was that God was due to arrive in their world, in their lives momentarily. Soon Jesus would be in their villages, in their streets and in their homes. The Kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world were on a collision course. Things could only get better if they readied themselves for Jesus' arrival.

During Advent we need to listen to our lives, then talk to a trustworthy friend about what we hear. Spend some time being quiet or go apart awhile. Juanita just spent two nights and part of three days in a retreat center in Richmond to return to a place of peace within. Walk the labyrinth and let the crooked path help straighten things out; do an activity you love, one you can lose yourself in for awhile. Always ask for God's help and guidance.

The Path of Holiness is about repenting often, making little course corrections before we go too far astray. Small changes are easier to make than big ones. Remember always God is on your side. St. Paul encouraged the young Christians in Philippi by writing, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

God has invested a great deal in each of us. We are God's good works, not completed. The road ahead is unknown and unpredictable, but our hope is that God is both with us now and in our future wherever it leads. We can live faithfully without having it all planned out or figured out. The true adventure is looking forward to seeing where Jesus will show up today and tomorrow. In which event, experience or person will grace visit?

Juanita and I walked out the back door for our customary early morning walk last Monday. First I thought I saw a bald eagle in front of our house circling overhead. Then we were struck by shafts of sunlight spotlighting trees in gold. If that wasn't enough, when we looked back at our house, a perfect rainbow arched directly over it. It was a surreal moment. We couldn't help but wonder if the veil between heaven and earth wasn't momentarily lifted. The glimpse was a gift we will treasure.

May such moments when we know God is near more and more be ours throughout this Advent season. Amen.