

Advent 2 Year C
Dec. 9, 2018
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

It was just about the scariest moment I've ever experienced
behind the wheel of a car.
And the situation developed so gradually
I didn't realize what a pickle I was in
until it was too late.

Mom and I were in Assisi, Italy.
Birthplace of St. Francis.
Assisi is a beautiful old medieval town
in northern Italy.
Very picturesque.

But like most beautiful old medieval towns in Europe
it wasn't designed for automobiles.
At best, the streets are narrow.
And I wasn't in anything close
To a best-case scenario.

I was just looking for a place to park the car
so mom and I could get out and walk around.
But we quickly got lost.
Road signs in Italy leave something to be desired.
The street we were on seemed to be taking us uphill.
It was very curvy
and very narrow.
And the farther we went,
the steeper and narrower the road got.

We soon decided that this was not a good road to be on.
We kept looking for a place to turn around,
to go back down the way we had come.
but the road was so narrow,
there WAS no place to turn around.
And it was so steep and curvy,
I didn't dare try to back down.

On and on we went,
getting more and more anxious about our predicament,
but not seeing anyway out of it.

Then at last, we came to a point where we simply could go no farther.
The road would not accommodate a car,
not even a small Italian car,
like the rental we were driving.
But we were on a hairpin turn.
I couldn't see how on earth we could back down.
As far as I could tell, we were stuck.
I didn't see how anybody could get us
out of the jam we were in.

Then along came one of the locals
who scowled at us,
and asked us why we had been so foolish
as to bring a car to this spot.
Who knew that in Italy,
a round white sign with a red circle on it
Means "No vehicles allowed"?
We certainly didn't know that's what that sign meant.

We tried to explain
that we didn't know when we started
that things would end like this.
We thought the road we were on
would take us safely to a place we wanted to be.
We hadn't foreseen the twists and turns and tight places.

Then the man told me to get out of the car.
He would maneuver it out of the spot it was in.
He would get us turned around
And headed in the direction we needed to go.

And sure enough, he did.
He saved us!
And he sent us off
with a warning to be more careful,
and told us where to turn to find parking.

I was reminded of this episode this week
as I studied our Scripture lessons for this morning.
Because, you see, that incident on a hill in Assisi
epitomizes for me the words of the prophet Isaiah:
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.

The Gospel tells us that
Two thousand years ago,
God's word to all creation
Came to a wild and wooly man
who lived in the wilderness,
on the fringes of society.

The word that John the Baptist heard,
and the message he delivered,
is not so much a threat
As it is a tender invitation
for each of us to be our best selves.
"Repent!" John said.

Repentance isn't the same thing as remorse or regret.
It's not necessarily about feeling guilty or ashamed.
And it's certainly not about groveling in self-hatred or recrimination.
It's not something that leaves us stuck,
unable to go backward or forward, spinning our wheels.

No, repentance is about movement.
When you repent, you turn around!
You change direction.
You choose a different path.

Repentance is about handing the steering wheel over to God,
getting new bearings,
and relying on God for directions.

The message that John the Baptist proclaimed in the wilderness
is about the new life that follows repentance,
The new direction that comes with a fresh start.

John's message is a call to action:
Repent! Turn around! Accept help!
God is coming to meet you on a road in the wilderness.
God will flatten out the steep hill,
And make straight the hairpin turn.
But - oh my goodness – what do we do in the meantime?
What do we do while we're waiting for God?

Here we are, at the Second Sunday of Advent.
Advent is a season of preparation.
Outside, people are cleaning,
getting their Christmas decorations out,
purchasing a tree,
baking,
hosting and attending Christmas parties.

But into the busy-ness of December,
every year John the Baptist comes barging in,
like an unwelcome guest,
interrupting our holiday schedule
and demanding that we make preparations
of a different kind.
John demands that we get ready for Jesus.
Before we can bask in Christmas joy,
before we get to enjoy the angels and the shepherds,
and the warm glow of the hearth,
and the comforting presence of friends and family...
Before we get to all of that,
John insists that we join him out in the wilderness
for some honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin.

John forces us to examine ourselves,
and our sinful world.
John reminds us
that we aren't just called to individual repentance.
We've got to look at the nastiness all around us,
and acknowledge that yes, we are complicit in it,
and yes, there ARE things we can do
to help turn that car around before it is too late.

The wilderness –
 That's where we have to go
 if we want to see the *whole* landscape whole,
 and participate in God's great work
 of leveling inequality and oppression.

Unless we're in the wilderness,
 it's hard to see our own privilege,
 and even harder to imagine giving it up.
 No one standing on a mountaintop
 wants the mountain to be flattened.
 But when we're wandering in the wilderness,
 an immense, barren landscape stretches out before us,
 and at last we're able to see
 what may be obscured to those in more privileged locations.

When we're in the wilderness,
 we may begin to feel the rough places beneath our feet.
 We may experience what it's like
 to struggle along twisty, crooked paths.
 We glimpse arrogance in the mountains
 and desolation in the valleys,
 and we begin to dream God's dream of a new landscape.
 A landscape so smooth and straight,
 it enables "all flesh" to see the salvation of God.

Where are you located during this Advent season?
 How close are you to power,
 and how open are you to risking the wilderness
 to hear a word from God?
 What might repentance look like for you, here and now?
 Where is God leveling the ground you stand on?

The word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness.
 May it come to us, too.
 Like John, may we become brave voices in hard places,
 preparing the way of the Lord.

Amen.

