

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

DARN STRAIGHT
Sermon for Advent 2C—Lk 3:1-6
LPC, 12/9/12

Years ago I was a professional, independent dressmaker. I served many clients to their satisfaction, with one notable exception. This was a young woman, the daughter of a friend of a friend, who came to me seeking a dress to wear to her brother's wedding.

The woman was attractive, but quite, shall we say, buxom. She wanted a dress that would draw attention to herself, she said, because she didn't want the bride, whom she disliked, to be the only woman people watched that day. She chose a style with a deep vee in front and a straight, short skirt. Her aim was to emphasize her obvious assets while minimizing her ample hips. To make sure she impressed from all angles, she wanted a low-cut back as well.

I was troubled by her motivation to outshine the bride, but at the time I was a tailor, not a spiritual advisor. I was sure I could make a dress that could emphasize her upper figure, but wasn't sure I could successfully disguise her lower figure. And I was frankly mystified about the physics of a dress with these specifications. Still, I like a challenge and I had never before turned away a client.

When I had the dress pieced together, I called her back for her first fitting. She was not satisfied. In fact, she called the dress "unwearable," as I recall. Still, she evinced confidence that I could make it right.

I resolved to try, try again, but after struggling with the dress for another couple of hours, and reflecting dispassionately on the situation, I called her and asked her to take back her deposit and the half-finished dress. She was dismayed and sorry if she had hurt my feelings. I told her with perfect honesty that my feelings were absolutely fine; I just didn't think we could work together.

I tell this rather long story as an example of how people make paths crooked. This young woman came to me for something which, evidently, she had unwavering confidence that I could supply. She just put so many conditions on her request that ultimately I felt I couldn't meet them all. The path I was having to take to meet her was very crooked and full of potholes and pitfalls. Does that sound familiar?

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, John the Baptizer appears in the wilderness before Jesus enters the scene. John preaches repentance of sins and quotes the prophet Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now, we all love the Lord here, right? I'll assume everyone here wants the Lord in their life because you are here in church instead of doing the Sunday Crossword or working on your golf stroke. In prayer, we ask God into our lives. In Advent we invite Christ to be born anew into our hearts. But we don't always make it very easy for God to

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

meet these requests. We fill the direct routes between God and ourselves with obstacles and potholes.

This is like inviting God to your house, and then covering the front walk with roller skates, marbles, broken glass, bear traps and land mines, sort of like Kevin in the Christmas movie *Home Alone*.

Of course, God is resourceful. God wants access to your house (your life, your heart, your soul) so badly that God will go around back, or down the chimney for that matter, but there are some things we can do to make it easier for God

Think of yourself and God as two points in space. The shortest distance between the two is obviously a straight line, but in practice many of us clutter up the distance between ourselves and God, so that God has to make detours to reach us.

One place this happens is in our prayers. In prayer we approach God fresh-faced and faithful, as sure that God can help us as my dressmaking client was sure about me. But then, like her, we have so many specifications for how God should meet our requests, that we don't leave God much room to maneuver. God, at least, has more patience than I do. God does not give up and offer us our money back

Our expectation that God will answer our prayers to order is one obstacle we place between ourselves and God. What are some others? Our busy-ness, our petty annoyances, our shame, our need to be "the best," our addictions, our materialism, our pride? Advent is the time to dump this stuff and sweep off the front walks of our hearts. Advent is the time to make the Lord's way as straight as we can.

Now, we are not alone in this effort. If we make an attempt to move the old sofa off the front lawn, God will pick up the other end. Like I said, God really does want to be part of our lives!

And so John the Baptist, quoting the prophet Isaiah, does not stop with the part about making the Lord's path straight. He goes on with the prophecy of what God will do in the fullness of time: "Every valley shall be filled and 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."

Remember what I said last week about Advent balancing between past, present and future? Here's an example of that. We hear the story about John preparing the way for Jesus many centuries ago (PAST). We look forward to God setting all things to rights, removing all obstacles to God's salvation in God's good time (FUTURE). At the same time, we experience, in our lifetimes, in ourselves, God's working in us to straighten out our kinks (PRESENT).

God will make, indeed already is making, all that is crooked straight again. We can help, or we can get in the way.