

2021 12 05 – Lessons from Hills & Valleys

Luke 21:25-36 (The Inclusive Bible)

John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the cousin of Jesus, was a real person who he lived in the early part of the first century of the Common Era. The author of the Gospel of Luke wants us to know that John existed and that he lived in a particular time in the history of the Jewish people. So he tells us that the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar was in his fifteenth year of power and he names the other Roman and Jewish leaders of the time.

An historian looking back on Swift Current, SK in 2021 might say:

In the 70th year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, Justin Trudeau was Prime Minister of Canada, Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Joe Biden, President of the United States. In those days, while Francis was Pope and Richard Bott was the Moderator of The United Church of Canada, Rev. Annette Taylor stood up to preach at First United Church in Swift Current SK.

I'm grateful that, unlike John, I have a safe and warm place to live and work. You see, John foraged and preached in the desert. He was a prophet, somewhat of an outcast, who heard and spoke the Word of God as he understood it. John preached to a particular people in a specific place and time. But his message rings true even now. Like prophets of all times and places, John was telling the people of Judea that they were to "Make ready the way of our God, clear a straight path."

John wanted the people of Judea to have a deep connection with their God. Just as I want all of us to have God's love in our lives. But how do we do that? How do we make it easier for the Spirit of Love to reach us? How do we make it easier for God's love to impact everyone? How do we make that path as smooth as possible?

Maybe the first place to start is to name some of the things that get in God's way. What is it that keeps the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being at a distance?

In first century Judea, the people were struggling with the oppression of the Roman emperor, his governors, and his army. Those with positions of authority in the Jewish temples were being tempted by the idols of money, security and power. There was leprosy and other plagues causing great physical suffering and those on the lowest rungs of society were living lives of destitution. There was also a great division amongst the people of Israel: the Samaritans, for instance, had different religious and cultural customs and were treated as the enemy. Finally, most of the people were so busy just making a living and raising their families that there was little time left for listening to God. It was hard for God's love to get past the injustice, the greed, the anger, the pride, the suffering, and the indifference that existed in that time and place. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?!

John called these roadblocks to God mountains, hills and valleys. He said, "Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be leveled."

Sometimes, in scripture and in worship we talk about mountains as high places of

joy and beauty and valleys as low places of suffering and pain. But that's not the metaphor that this prophet is creating. John is suggesting that the mountains, hills and the valleys represent all the things that keep us from connecting with God. So, in order for God's love to reach us, and the rest of the world, these obstacles need to be removed, the path must be made smooth and straight.

So what do we know about mountains and hills and valleys? First of all let's look at how they are created. According to the National Geographic website:

The world's tallest mountain ranges form when pieces of Earth's crust—called plates—smash against each other in a process called plate tectonics, and buckle up like the hood of a car in a head-on collision. The Himalayas in Asia formed from one such massive wreck that started about 55 million years ago.

Volcanic mountains form when molten rock from deep inside the Earth erupts through the crust and piles up on itself. The islands of Hawaii were formed by undersea volcanoes, and the islands seen above water today are the remaining volcano tops.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/mountains>

Valleys are formed automatically with the creation of mountain ranges, but here in the prairies we know that valleys can also be formed by rivers carving through earth and rock. When you think about it, it takes a lot of time and energy to create these amazing features in our landscape. And it will take just as much time and energy to remove them.

One of the most incredible examples of mountains being leveled is found here in Canada. Geologists tell us that over 3 billion years ago, the plates of the earth were forced together and formed what may have been the largest mountain range ever created on earth. It covered much of what we know as North America including: Quebec, the northern parts of Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan and even into the North West Territories. For over 2 billion years those mountains were eroded by wind and rain and a couple of ice ages until they became the low hills and lake-filled valleys that we now know as the Canadian Shield. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/shield>

It takes a long time to level mountains and hills and to fill up the valleys between them. It takes time to do the work of making ready the way of our God. This is true whether we are talking about breaking down societal systems like racism, homophobia or economic injustice or dealing with personal issues like suffering, fear, pride, anger and indifference. Either way it doesn't happen overnight. Recently I watched a webinar that talked about change in the church and the speaker, Tim Soerens, noted that congregations often: "over estimate what we can do in 1 to 2 years and under estimate what is possible in 10 to 20 years."

One of the lessons that we can learn from the hills and valleys is that change may not happen overnight, but it does happen and it happens one rain drop, one breath of wind at a time. Every time we take a few moments to breath, to pray, to open ourselves to God's love, we move ourselves and our community one step farther along the path. Every time we read a book, attend a seminar, write a

letter, reach out to our neighbour we are breaking down those hills of violence and war and filling up those valleys of injustice and oppression.

Every once in while an ice age comes along and speeds up the process of erosion and we see a large piece fall all at once. Just this past week we have experienced two of those ice age moments: the Affrming Ministry vote here at First United last Sunday and the passing of the bill on the banning of Conversion Therapy that took place in the House of Commons on Wednesday. Both of these events have leveled a significant stretch of road on the way to God's reign on earth.

John said, "The twisted paths will be made straight, and the rough road smooth – and all humankind will see the salvation of God." To me, seeing the salvation of God, means knowing the healing power of God in our own lives and in the world. It means experiencing the wonder of the building of God's reign of justice and peace. It means leaning into the transforming power of the Holy Mystery. Here at First United, this is our mission, our ministry in the world.

Every year, during Advent, we prepare the way for the celebration of the birth of Jesus and the coming of Christ again in our lives. This year, let us also recognize and celebrate the many ways that we are already fulfilling John's prophecy and clearing the way for God's love. We live in a world of war and hate, pain and suffering, but we live in hope because we follow the life and teachings of Jesus, a man of faith and justice. We live in love because we follow a child of peace, born in the dark of night, with only a manger for his bed.