

“Course Corrections”

2 Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-6

December 6, 2009

Most of you will recall that Charles Lindbergh was the first person to fly an airplane from New York to Paris -- but that has been so long that you have probably forgotten the details.

The year was 1927. They were offering \$25,000 to the first person to fly from New York to Paris. That was a lot of money in 1927 -- like \$300,000 today. Lindbergh was trying to win the money -- and lots of other people were trying to do the same thing. But it wasn't just the money. It was the challenge -- and the chance to go down in history.

Lindbergh needed to start his flight in the early hours of the morning. That way, he would have daylight over Newfoundland and later over Ireland.

But Lindbergh got a bad start. He had been waiting for a break in the weather, and it didn't seem likely that the weather would improve anytime soon. Friends invited him to a show in New York, and he went. Then there was a sudden break in the weather. Other teams were poised to take off, so any delay might hand the victory to one of those teams. Lindbergh had to decide whether to take off right away or to get some sleep and wait a day.

He decided to take early that morning. That meant that he could sleep only two or three hours before beginning his forty-hour flight. He decided to go for it. Then he went to bed to get what little sleep he could before taking off. He had just fallen asleep when a man awakened him to ask a foolish question - - so Lindbergh started his 40-hour flight with only 30 minutes sleep.

Lindbergh had planned his trip in minute detail. He was flying the Great Circle Route over the Arctic, so he laid out 40 segments -- one per hour -- each with a slightly different compass heading.

As you might imagine, after 15 hours in the air, Lindbergh's need for sleep became nearly overwhelming -- and he had more than 24 hours left to go. He tried everything to stay awake, but found himself drifting in and out of consciousness. He later said that he slept with his eyes open -- but unseeing -- unknowing.

In his autobiography, Lindbergh tells what that was like. While flying over the Atlantic, his mind would drift back to his boyhood when he was tending sheep on his father's farm. He remembered finding a newborn lamb whose mother had abandoned him -- and taking the lamb home -- and tending to its needs. And then his mind would snap back to his controls. TWELVE DEGREES RIGHT RUDDER.

And then he would remember attending an auction to buy cows. "Sixty-four I'm bid. Sixty-four I'm bid. Who'll make it sixty-five? Make it sixty-five! -- Fresh last month and going at sixty-four dollars! - - She's worth ninety if she's worth a cent -- going at sixty-four going at sixty-four SOLD to Charles Lindbergh at sixty-four dollars!"

And then Lindbergh would see that he was off-course again. FIVE DEGREES RIGHT RUDDER.

Then his mind would drift again -- this time to old man Thompson, who helped him build a log house for their hogs. They had to build the walls thick and chink the cracks carefully, because there were no stoves for the outbuildings and the Minnesota winters were bitterly cold. But then Lindbergh would see that he was off-course again. SEVEN DEGREES RIGHT RUDDER.

And so it went minute after minute -- hour after hour -- through daylight and dusk and night and dawn and daylight again -- and finally into his second night aloft. Lindbergh must have made a thousand course corrections -- five degrees here -- seven degrees there -- twelve degrees another place.

Why couldn't he just point the plane in the right direction and forget the details? The answer is simple. If he had failed to make those corrections, he would have never found Europe, much less Paris. He needed to take stock, not just every hour, but every few minutes. It was literally a matter of life and death. If he lost his way, he would die in the freezing Atlantic waters. No doubt about it!

It occurred to me that his constant course corrections are much like our lives. As we go through life, we need constantly to make corrections in the way we live -- in the way we relate to other people -- in the way we think -- in the way we relate to God. In the Christian faith, we call those course corrections "repentance."

Repentance is not something that we do just once when we first become Christians. Repentance does not always involve turning one's life around 180 degrees. Daily repentance is a matter of dealing with the little things of daily life-- a bit of anger here -- an unkind word there -- a spot of jealousy -- the possibilities are endless.

The point is that things do go wrong every day, so we need to make course corrections every day -- probably every hour. Like Charles Lindbergh we can doze off in life and unless something jerks our head and wakes us up we can run off course and never know it. That's just another way of saying that we need to make course corrections, to change the way we think -- to change the way we live -- to change the way we interact with other people -- to change the direction of our lives. We need to do that day by day -- sometimes hour by hour. In our Gospel it is John that is waking the people up and getting them to make the necessary course corrections.

What about you? Who or what is God using to help you make the adjustments, the course corrections, to repentance that leads to life?

AMEN