

Readings & Sermon December 8, 2024

Second Sunday of Advent

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Put on your hard hat. Prepare the way.”



John the Baptist is a herald of Jesus, whose way is prepared by “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” As we hear the careful record of human leaders, we sense the spectrum of political and religious authority that will be challenged by this coming Lord.

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
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.’ ”

Psalm: Luke 1: 68-79

Blessed are you, Lord, the God of Israel,
you have come to your people and set them free.
You have raised up for us a mighty Savior,
born of the house of your servant David.
Through your holy prophets, you promised of old to save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us,
to show mercy to our forebears,
and to remember your holy covenant.
This was the oath you swore to our father Abraham:
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,
free to worship you without fear,
holy and righteous before you, all the days of our life.
And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God’s people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

First Reading: Malachi 3:1-4

God announces a covenant with Israel. A messenger like Malachi (his name means “my messenger”) will prepare the way for the coming of the Lord by purifying and refining God’s people, as silver and gold are refined.

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like

fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Put on your hard hat. Prepare the way.”

John the Baptist is calling us to the holy work of road construction. It seems like the wrong season for that here in Wisconsin, but nonetheless, we know some things about road construction.

First, it's disruptive. There's some deconstruction before the construction starts. Exits, lanes, and sometimes even bridges get closed. Heavy equipment moves in. Families or businesses might need to move out. Patterns change and, for a time, traffic slows down. Way down.

With big highway projects, the ultimate goal is to smooth the flow of traffic: To reduce congestion, make on-ramps and off-ramps safer, and minimize dangerous stop-and-go situations. Smaller, local projects might focus on paving over the rough spots, providing lanes for bicyclists, building sidewalks for pedestrians, or solving problems with flooding.

The construction project John presents is similar in some ways: The land will be leveled out. Rough patches will be smoothed over. Crooked roads will be straightened. But the goal is not safer, faster commutes. The goal is improved visibility, actually perfect visibility: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

That is a construction project suitable for the season of Advent. We are preparing the way of the Lord, clearing away every obstacle that would keep anyone from experiencing the saving love of God. And there are some obstacles out there: potholes to fall into, boulders that block the roadway, and crooked paths that make the way to God seem anything but grace-filled.

God does not come to lead us down twisted, complicated, cumbersome paths. God comes to guide our feet in the way of peace. In today's psalm, Zechariah makes that joyful, hopeful proclamation as he celebrates the birth of his son, who we call John the Baptist.

The song we hear from Zechariah marks the first time he has spoken since an angel informed him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son. Scripture tells us that Elizabeth was barren, and that she and her husband were "getting on in years."

So the angel's promise seems unbelievable, impossible to Zechariah. The angel tells him: Because you didn't believe, you won't be able to speak a word until the day your son is born.

And the first words he speaks praise the God who comes to save us - because Zechariah has experienced God's saving love first-hand.

And Zechariah's son John will prepare the way so that all people will know God's saving love. Today John is all grown up, and he invites us to be part of his construction crew.

Where might crooked roads keep people from experiencing God's love? What valleys need to be filled in so everyone has access to God's gifts? What hills and mountains block the view of God's goodness?

Sometimes the church itself gets in the way.

During our midweek worship up at Gloria Dei, we're peeking into the book of Revelation, which begins with letters to seven specific churches that are struggling to survive and live faithfully under the oppression of the Roman Empire.

One of the letters commends the church at Ephesus for patiently enduring, but it also cautions this: "You have abandoned the love you had at first." A church that does everything else faithfully but does not have love obscures the vision of God's love.

Throughout history, denominations, congregations, and individual Christians have worked in ways that block access to God's love and grace.

In word, in action, or by subtle suggestion, religious folks have communicated to others that they are not good enough, that their gifts are not important enough, that they are not

worthy of God's love, that they believe the wrong things or worship the wrong way, that they are too young or too old or too sinful, that their very existence is an abomination.

Sometimes the judgment pronounced by religious people rises like a mountain our neighbors feel like they have to scale in order to get to God. And some of our neighbors have decided it's not worth the climb.

John the Baptist doesn't instruct us to put up roadblocks or even coach people up the mountains. John calls us to remove every roadblock and level the mountains.

And not just those created by the church. The world around us also puts up plenty of roadblocks.

If we read just a few more verses in Malachi, God names some of those behaviors that prevent people from experiencing love and mercy. God names ways that people harm and neglect others, forcing them into valleys of desperation or despair: adultery, lying about others, refusing to pay workers fair wages, failure to care for those who are vulnerable, casting aside foreigners.

It is hard to see God's love in the world when you are fighting to climb your way out of the valley. We who are called to prepare the way of the Lord are called to the work of leveling and grading so that all people everywhere can see God's salvation.

And today's gospel hints that sometimes our holy construction work will put us at odds with the emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests of our time - just like John the Baptist and Jesus after him. Like a highway expansion, bridge repairs, or the installation of new water mains, holy construction work causes disruption.

But these road construction projects are too important to be delayed. Our world needs to know the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus brings - and no obstacle can stand in the way: Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

We know how important this work is, because many of us - maybe all of us - have experienced rugged mountains, deep valleys, and impassable roads on our journeys of faith. We have been told we are not good enough. We have been used or neglected or just beat up by the world around us - maybe even by the church. Doors have been slammed in our faces. Grace and forgiveness have been withheld.

When that has happened to you, who cleared the way so that you could see God's saving love? What did they do? Maybe they flattened a mountain of judgment. Pulled you out of a valley of shame and filled it in with love. Built a straight path paved in grace to replace a road made crooked and bumpy by impossible rules and complicated doctrines.

That is the holy construction work to which John the Baptist summons us this Advent as we wait. One day, Jesus will return, and all people and all creation will experience God's saving love. We are not called to wait idly for that day. We are invited to begin preparing the way now, using whatever tools we have, so that more and more people will see – until that day when we all see God's salvation.

And then we will take off our gloves, our boots, and our hard hats, and we will worship together.

Pastor Jaime

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