

Road under Repair – Rev. Laurie McKay  
December 5, 2021

**Malachi 3:1-4**

**Responsive Reading: Luke 1: 68-70**

**Luke 3:1-6**

\*As we hear of landslides and floods closing roads and this week the closures to keep people from getting caught under the shifting landscape, we hear also John's message that echoes Isaiah's prophecy: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

3:5 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;

3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Construction zones are messy and dangerous places. When I get stopped with an enforced waiting, I am always impressed with how many workers seem to get paid to watch and wait for their turn to do a task. That's a bit cheeky of me but perhaps we can learn a lesson from this. It is advent after all, and we are called to wait and watch for the coming of the salvation of God. For someone like me who prefers to be driving the loader or semi-truck, I am reminded of the value of being still, and watching. We are called to prepare in whatever wilderness or broken road that stops us from the rhythm of life. And that is an intentional step to pick up a shovel and wait.

\*For John the Baptist, it wasn't a shovel but a river of water that was his tool of rebuilding. Rebuilding the people of Israel meant first washing them from their sins – putting them through a refining process. This ritual cleansing – unlike others – was relational. In other purification rites, people wash themselves.

\*Last week I was privileged to receive the cleansing of the smudge from elder Dorothy Vissers, but even that rite requires a personal engagement in the act of cleansing your eyes, ears, hands, legs, and heart with the smoke of the smudge.

\*An element that John the Baptist brings in the message of forgiveness of sins is the act of submission. John is the agent of God's cleansing and to surrender to his administration means choosing to submit to an authority other than our own.

People were lined up in the wilderness waiting for their own rebuilding as part of the people's reshaping. Jesus was one of those in line – practicing submission to an authority above his own. And that became a debate in the early church. Whose authority was greater – John or Jesus? In the baptism of repentance, people are granted forgiveness – all the dross of shame, guilt, judgements from within and outside of them – gone. Scraped and ready for the rebuilding of the reign of God in the highway of the world.

\*In Advent we enter this liminal space – leaving what was behind and not yet in the reality of the vision. This season is our season as a church leaning into leaving behind one way of being church, to a “not yet” realized vision. This is an important space when we submit to the authority of the Scriptures and the Lord, revealed by the Spirit to prepare the Way in New Westminster and Burnaby. We are scraping the rough spots and it can be uncomfortable.

\*(Prepare to be annoyed)

In the book by Susan Beaumont called “How to lead when you don't know where you're going – Leading in a Liminal season” she names the season that the Growing Together Church – and indeed the larger church – is in. “Liminal seasons are challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We try to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can't yet be known.

Liminal seasons are also exciting and innovative. The promise of a new beginning unleashes creative energy, potential, and passion. All truly great innovations are incubated in liminality. God's greatest work occurs in liminal space.” P.2

Does this not also define Advent? \*(pregnant) This season is a necessary waiting while a child develops unseen, preparing to be born in the fullness of time. This same experience is that of the \*teenager preparing for a not yet formed future that is full of possibilities – uncomfortable, and confusing, but not without activity, anticipation and engagement. It is a liminal season when we

\*accompany the dying as they stand in the doorway of this life and the next.

While they prepare to take that final step, we prepare to say goodbye, recounting the difference that person has made in our life and in the world. At the same time we begin to wonder what life will be like in a new reality.

\*It takes courage to enter liminal space. As a community, we choose to walk in faith together through this Advent time. We are courageous and faithful and God

is preparing us with the tools we already have, to build a new road – not a destination, but a way of moving people safely on the Way.

A few things that may help then:

\*Leaders must lead from a stance of non-anxious Presence and openness to wonder. One of the values that we have embraced as a community is shared leadership – not top down but more like a circle or spiral. In this liminal state, we remember the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness and they were not happy about leaving their previous identity of slaves in Egypt – at least there they knew how to function with food. It was in the wilderness that God turned slaves into the people of Israel – God’s chosen. That took generations and humble leadership of Moses plus the elders who were assigned various tasks – even in the wilderness.

In this liminal season, God is shaping us into a new people. We are all leaders. As Christians in this culture, we are agents of change as “little Christs”. Remember to stay open to wonder and be a non-anxious presence for those around us.

\*Other helpful calls for our community in this liminal time, is to remember God is shaping our spiritual life and identity. Corinne Ware, professor of theology at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest, names four styles of spirituality: thinking feeling, being, doing. Congregations that favor a head, or thinking spirituality are attracted to sermons, lectures, and study as a way of experiencing God. They value the written word and sound doctrine, love order and desire for things to be rational and logical. Congregations with a heart spirituality know God by feeling God’s presence. They favor a spirituality with highs and lows in religious feelings and values spontaneous experiences through music, testimony and more informal worship. A congregation with a “being” spirituality values the journey and a mystical experience of God through contemplation, wordless prayer and silence. Stillness is a mark of a “being” spirituality. Finally, some congregations embrace a spirituality of “doing”. God’s presence is experienced when they are actively working to advance a cause, or a social concern.

But there is a difference between spirituality and soul.

\*The soul is the authentic and truest self of the church. It will take time and grace to shape from three into one. It is a shy creature that prefers to stay hidden. But we will catch glimpses of it from time to time when we laugh and pray and feel the joy of the Spirit working miracles within, among, and through us. This is the

work of God is reshaping us as a community. It will take time and engagement by all of us as we grow together. \*In January, we will sharpen our vision and prioritizing steps – short, mid and long term. However, we will still be in a thin space. The thin space is where God is forming the people who are yet to be born and we will need patience, grace, and the ability to wonder at how together we are like that road under repair – being brought low, and raised up. So grab your shovel in anticipation. I can hardly wait to see God do the heavy lifting among us.