

“New Highway” – Advent 2 – Dec 6/09 - Luke 3: 1-6

I had an opportunity recently to head out to Horseshoe Bay. No, it wasn't to see my boat, because it's now in the back yard and I get to touch it every time I get into the truck or out of the truck at home. Instead my trip out to Horseshoe Bay was to meet with the Clerk of Synod who was passing through from the Sunshine Coast to Vancouver Island, and we had supper together and a chance to talk about Synod business. It also gave me a chance to see a bit of the new Sea-to-Sky Highway, and although I haven't gone very far up that road since last summer, it does look lovely with dark black pavement accentuating the crisp new lane markings, all smooth and wide and pristine. New signs are in place, and directions are clear and easy to read even with tired eyes. While few or none of us will be privileged enough to travel that new highway for the next few months our turn will come and we can enjoy it later this year.

I have to be careful that I don't sound too grumpy about the coming disruptions, or the money that has been poured into them, just in case the Lords of the Rings come storming in to enforce the new bylaws! Yes, I'm a bit grumpy about it all, and sounding a bit like John the Baptist. At least that's what we mostly think about John the Baptist, that he was all feisty and grumpy. And why should anyone be grumpy? After all, isn't this the season of Christmas cheer, about hanging tinsel and decorations, cheerful hellos, seasons greetings, and Jingle Bells? And yet isn't it a bit odd that here we are, in church, instead reading about a strange man berating his listeners and talking about nasty things to come?

Yes, I would agree it seems a bit odd, but I would also argue that we have a very good reason for doing this, namely that we are following scriptural tradition. After all, the authors of all the Gospels felt it necessary to begin their Gospel story with an introduction to John the Baptist, or more properly if less common, John the Baptiser. Aren't you ever curious as to why they did that? Of all of the events at the beginning of the story of God's grace being made manifest in Jesus, why is the common starting point from all four Gospel writers a glimpse not at Jesus, but at John?

I believe there are two parts to the answer. First, the gospel authors needed to address a “hot topic” of the day, and that was “who was more important, Jesus or John?” For us it's not even an question, but it's pretty clear from the amount of ink that the gospel writers devoted to the topic that it was a huge issue both during Jesus' ministry, and even more so afterward. The gospel authors take pains to let their early readers hear John's followers, having been sent by him to Jesus, find confirmation when they ask Jesus, “are you the one?”. Those gospel authors also let their early readers (and let us!) hear John himself proclaim that Jesus is so much more important that he is not worthy of even tying Jesus' sandals.

It follows that if the authors of the Gospels went to so much trouble to show that Jesus was superior to John, there must have been many, many people both within and outside the early church who thought otherwise, and there is considerable evidence that this was the case. Right from the start there were many people who believed that John – and thus John's somewhat cantankerous message of repentance and coming doom – was not only as important but more so than Jesus' message of forgiveness, grace, and divine mercy and love. Even the leaders of the newly-forming church argued bitterly over this very issue, with James and Peter and the Jerusalem Party standing firm on the necessity for rules and strict adherence to the old ways of earning God's forgiveness, against Paul's passionate, Spirit-inspired vision of freedom through God's grace in Christ, of a grace and mercy that covered Jew and Greek, male and female, sinner and saint alike.

Sadly we can see that very same struggle continues today. Within the church, within our denomination, even within our own presbytery, there are those who would stand firmly and rigidly with James and Peter. They go so far as to imply that somehow salvation in Christ is a very ‘iffy’ thing, that a stern and unforgiving God will yank that salvation away for the slightest of transgressions, never mind for major ones. These are for the most part good and faithful people but who nevertheless

continue to portray God's love as conditional, difficult to obtain, easy to lose, and something to be feared, who harp on behaviour as our self-controlled and self-controlling means of not only obtaining but keeping God's grace.

But there are those also who hear Paul's version, and declare with rejoicing that God is not capricious and has offered a salvation so complete, so utterly strong in Christ that once accepted can never be broken, stolen, withdrawn, go stale or moldy, that can never rot away, that can never allow us to be separated from the love of God in Christ. These are the people who see God's mercy and redemption as an unearned gift of grace – indeed a gift that cannot be earned – offered in exchange for a faith in Christ; who hear his call to treat others with that same mercy and tenderness and caring and love; who, being overwhelmed by this magnificent gift of love try to live a life of loving service in response.

Yes, the struggle between the followers of John and the followers of Jesus, the conflict between perspectives of gloom and grace, that struggle against which the gospel writers wrote, pointing out the supremacy of Christ's call to compassion over John's "brood of vipers", continues today, and that struggle probably will continue until Christ's return.

So, if John the Baptist was put in his place by the gospel authors, what was that place? If he was not as 'important' as Jesus, what then was his role, or can we dismiss him entirely? No, we can't. It is clear that the gospel authors understood John to be a prophet, proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, the chosen One of God, and who ultimately recognized Jesus as being the very One whose coming he was called to proclaim. All of the gospel authors saw John as himself being the very fulfillment of prophecy, as indeed the one who fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah, "a voice in the wilderness crying, prepare the way of the Lord." John the Evangelist even quotes John the Baptist as declaring himself to be that very voice, as being the one calling for the preparation of the way for the Lord, whom he would confirm as Jesus.

What a wonderful metaphor that image of preparing the way is. For the prophet Isaiah, sharing the burden and the shame and the pain of exile in Babylon, the image he saw was a superhighway to redemption, a multi-lane freeway opened up for the Jewish exiles to travel back to Jerusalem, and thus back into the presence of their God. It was an image of an easy route back to God, gentle slopes, soft curves, smooth pavement – completely different from the difficult goat and camel trails they had been forced to walk over the mountains on their way into captivity and exile.

These days that kind of road building seems pretty simple. Rocks are easily drilled and blasted, massive earthmoving equipment makes leveling the hills and filling in the valleys a routine task. Not so in ancient times, when building any roads was a long, dirty and laborious task. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of people provided the power to move the earth one basket at a time. It took the effort and cooperation of many, many people to make a wide, smooth road.

And now we have been invited to be the labourers, working on this new highway, this 'way of the Lord', turning steep hills into gentle inclines, filling in deep and dangerous valleys, paving the road smooth, all so that others may have an easier task of meeting the Lord. The 'way of the Lord' is not just a highway down which Jesus can ride in all his finery – he proved that to the world and to us by walking our dusty, dirty streets on the way to his death on the cross. Isaiah's 'way of the Lord' is also a smooth highway for throngs of people to travel to meet God. John the Baptist was called to his unique prophetic task of preparing the way for the Lord Jesus; we are called to help prepare the way for people to meet the Lord.

Now, for the life of me, I can't understand how some people think that making the road difficult makes for better travelers. That by putting up sin-seeking inspection posts, digging ditches of exclusion, paving with the shards of humiliation to shred even the most repentant knees, placing stones and rocks and boulders of conflict, making sure the road is so narrow that two can't walk side by side – I can't understand how they think that makes better pathway to meet the Lord. It seems clear to me

that winners of some kind of religious 'iron man' competition still get to meet the same Jesus who welcomes the throngs who travel on the highways and byways carved out by those who want to make their way smooth by the love they have also experienced.

And so I will try particularly hard not to sound grumpy, especially in this Season of Advent, because I would rather pitch in to help smooth the path for others, I would like to join the road gangs making it easier, not harder, for people to discover the incredibly magnificent love of God in Christ. Together we can remove those rocks of harsh words and conflict; fill in the potholes of uncaring; cut a pass through the mountains of exclusivism and rejection; fill in the valleys of discouragement and denial; straighten out the sharp curves of power struggle. While we decorate and anticipate the coming of our Lord, we can also help to prepare the way of the Lord, paving a wide, smooth highway of reconciliation, of peace, of comforting his people, so that arm-in-arm, a thousand lanes wide, we may walk together in joy and thanksgiving to meet our Lord. Once that preparation has been started, then it will be time to meet the mighty saviour, born a tender child, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.