

### **“Prepare the Way” – Luke 3: 1-6**

Does it seem a little odd to you that while everyone else is playing Christmas carols at this time of year, the church is looking at John the Baptist? Does it seem a bit curious that while other people are hanging tinsel and decorations, we are listening to the voice of a crusty old prophet screeching about repentance and coming judgement? That instead of cheerful hellos, seasons greetings, and jingle Bells, we focus on a strange man berating his listeners and talking about things to come?

I would agree that it seems a bit odd, but I would also argue that we have a very good reason for doing this, and that is 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. Are you ever curious, as I am, 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 the answer to that question is two-fold. First, they needed to address a “hot topic” of the day, and that was the relative importance between John and Jesus. For us it’s not even an issue, but it was an issue both during Jesus’ ministry and 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?”. And we are able to hear also as some of the gospel authors let their early readers hear John himself proclaim that Jesus is so much more important that he is not worthy of even tying Jesus’ sandals.

It is readily apparent (to me, at least) that if the authors of the Gospels went to so much trouble to show that Jesus was superior to John, there must have been a considerable number of 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.

I hope I don’t need to point out that that very same struggle continues today. Within the church, even within our own presbytery, there are those who would stand firmly and rigidly with James and Peter, and argue (often to their own surprise, when they have ears to hear) that salvation in Christ is a very ‘iffy’ thing, so fragile and offered so tenuously that it can and is withdrawn for the slightest of transgressions, never mind for major ones. These are the faithful who 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 grasping God’s grace.

But there are those also within the church, and within our own presbytery (and I include myself here) who side with Paul, 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 and unearnable gift of grace, 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 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 probably will 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? 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 ultimately recognizing Jesus as being the very One whose very coming he was called to proclaim. All of the gospel authors saw John as himself the fulfillment of prophecy, as 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 as 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, an empty-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, in high contrast to the goat and camel trails they had been forced to walk over the mountains on their way into exile.

I thought about this passage a great deal on our recent trip down the Baja peninsula, on the TransPeninsular Highway. It is indeed a road carved out of a desert wilderness, replacing a hard and rocky trail. In many places, especially on the faces of steep mountains, remaining pieces of the old road testify to how difficult travel was before the new highway was built. Not all of the valleys have been filled in, however, and not many of the mountains have yet been turned into hills and plains. The road is narrow, with no shoulders, and with sharp drop-offs ranging from a foot or so to several thousand feet. In at least one place the road can be described as a 'trip into hell', which we descended at night, no less! (We finished one day's journey in the darkness – a practice which is highly discouraged in all the literature – and I didn't have time to translate the sign I saw that said something about 'Inferno' – I recall thinking it must have meant something about a power plant, or some such. It was only after we arrived at the campground that the people there – from Coquitlam, no less, so there is hope of finding people from B.C. in the Inferno – asked us with astonishment, "You drove the 'Descent Into Hell' at night?!") There were many places where the road, because they can't afford bridges, simply dips down into and across a river bed. Most, but not all of these are marked; many are even marked as dangerous, because the road may or may not be under fast-moving water, or the road having been under fast-moving water at some time in the past may or may not have pavement – indeed, there may or may not even be a road as we know it! Discovering that at 100KPH, even in a four-by-four, is definitely NOT recommended! Curves are dangerous on that highway, even ones not marked as dangerous, because the signs have been taken out by a semi, a bus, or an incautious tourist heading for the cactus. From the remains of vehicles that failed to make the curves, it seems as if there is often a contest as to whether the engine or the injured driver is removed first from the crashed vehicle!

There were many places where I thought if only some major earth-moving equipment could be brought in, then with one giant swoop many of the hills could be smoothed out, and the valleys filled in, and the road widened. After all, the rock there is very soft, at least to someone who grew up playing on some of the oldest rocks on the planet. There, to lower a hill and fill in a valley called for diamond drills, compressors, water, noise, rock dust, blasting mats, and neat explosions! (My hobby was electronics, and it was a long time before I discovered wire came in different colours – all of us

had balls of blasting wire just like southern kids had balls of string!) Road building in the Precabrian Shield is a major exercise.

But I realized that the road construction and maintenance in the Baja reflected the local economy. Even with the cost, big equipment could be brought in, but that would mean the loss of so many jobs. With deep, wide ditches, for example, there would be no need for local people to be hired to mix cement by hand, pour culverts, and paint them white every year after the rains. Whether patching potholes one at a time, or scratching detours around washed-out wados, or clearing brush one cactus at a time, there was an opportunity for people from tiny hamlets and towns alike all along the road to earn at least part of their living from working on the road.

That image of people finding work along the road completed for me the image of “preparing the way”. What a wonderful metaphor for the world today, for us today, the image of building Isaiah’s highway in the desert of life. We have been invited to work on 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 putting up inspection posts with guards and barriers, how making sure that the road is paved with enough broken glass to shred even the most repentant knees, how placing stones and cactuses (cacti?) and rocks and boulders on the road as ‘challenges’, how making sure the road is so narrow two can’t walk side by side, how deliberately steering the road up scree fields and down dangerous cliffs, how all of that makes better travelers to meet the Lord. The two or three or ten zealots, the contestants in some kind of religious ‘iron man’ competition who survive, get to meet the same Jesus who welcomes the throngs who travel on the highways and byways carved out by those who want to reflect unto others the love they have experienced.

I for one would rather pitch in to help smooth the path for others, would like to join the road gangs making it easier, not harder, for people to discover the incredibly magnificent love of God in Christ. Remove the rocks of harsh words; fill in the potholes of uncaring; cut a pass through the obstacles of exclusivism and rejection; fill in the valleys of discouragement and denial; straighten out the sharp curves of power struggle. As we hear these words so appropriate to the celebration of the coming of God as a baby in a stable in a backwoods town in a remote corner of the world, let us help to prepare the way of the Lord, paving a highway of reconciliation, of peace, of comforting his people, that arm-in-arm, a thousand lanes wide, we may walk together in joy and thanksgiving to meet our Lord, even Jesus Christ.