

Prepare the Way: It's About Road Construction

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1-8 Isaiah 40:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The assigned lectionary gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Advent each year always focuses on John the Baptist. This makes a lot of sense, of course, because John's role of preparing the way for the long-prophesied Messiah fits well with the purpose of the Season of Advent, with its focus on our active preparation and anticipation of celebrating both the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day and the time when all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

The Gospel of Mark, by the way, was the first of the gospels to have been written, probably sometime between the years 65-70 C.E. And you may have noticed that it is at the very beginning of this gospel when John the Baptist is introduced. This, in turn, is followed immediately by the story of the baptism of Jesus as an adult.

In the Gospel of Mark, then, there are no angelic visitations to Mary or Joseph, no story of a visit between Mary and Elizabeth (John the Baptist's mother), no trip to Bethlehem, no baby Jesus laying in a manger, no shepherds out in their field, no wise men following a star and bearing gifts, no fleeing to Egypt to escape a paranoid King Herod. No, these elements of the **birth narratives** are only found in both the Gospels Matthew and Luke, which were written (using Mark's gospel as a template) more than a decade or so after Mark. This, along with the fact that the apostle Paul says nothing of Jesus' birth – indicating it was not yet part of the developing Christian tradition – has led more than a few biblical scholars to conclude that the birth narratives themselves were actually the invention and construction of later authors who sought to reflect the developing theological understanding of Jesus within the Christian movement in their time.

In other words, the birth stories were written symbolically to answer the post-resurrection question, "Where did this Jesus come from?" But alas, that's another story, one not without its own share of controversy that I'll have to address at another time.

Throughout this coming liturgical year the assigned lectionary gospel readings will come primarily from the Gospel of Mark. So let's jump right into the events that, according to Mark, launched Jesus on his ministry and mission.

To better understand the crucial role played by John the Baptist, it helps to know a bit about **road construction in biblical times**, and the role of advance teams that prepared the way for the visit of important dignitaries. Let me explain. In the ancient world, not too much unlike our day and time, high government officials (especially kings) would send advance teams ahead of them to the cities they planned to visit.

Important information in those days was by spread by town heralds who would cry out the news in the public town square or marketplace. They would also make whatever preparations were necessary for the impending visit of the dignitary.

There was one particularly problematic issue, however, that usually had to be dealt with on a regular basis before important folks would travel. That was the condition of what passed for roadways thousands of years ago. They were always in a state of disrepair. (Upon reflection, I guess that's not too much unlike the state of the roads here in Tulsa.) Sometimes, all it took was to remove shrubs and boulders that blocked the road. At other times, however, the disrepair was so extensive that entire new portions of a road had to be constructed before a king or high official would travel. And not unlike modern-day road construction projects, people in ancient times would have to prepare for a new roadway by filling in valleys, leveling hills, and making the pathway as straight and smooth as possible.

These methods of road construction were the basis of the imagery used by the Old Testament prophet in the Book of Isaiah when he proclaimed:

A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.'

The gospel writer Mark quotes a portion of this passage from Isaiah 40 (and combines it with a couple of other passages from the Hebrew scriptures) to open his account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Mark announces that John the baptizer, like messengers and heralds of old, appeared in the wilderness to prepare the way not of some high government official, but of the Lord. John does this by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and announcing the coming of one stronger than he who would baptize in the Holy Spirit (1:2-8).

In essence, John proclaimed a message that **encouraged folks to repent, which meant that the people should have a change of heart and mind and spirit and attitude and behavior. In other words, to do whatever was necessary to turn back to God and return to the ways of God.**

That's an important message at any time during the year, but especially as we approach the celebration of Christmas. Understanding John's message this way allows it to become just as relevant and important to each of us in our day and age. So, not unlike John the Baptist's original audience, and Mark's original readers, we too can ask of ourselves:

- Is there any change of heart and mind and spirit and attitude and behavior that can help you (and us as a congregation) to turn back to God?
- Do you, do we, need to learn any new and better ways of thinking and doing?
- Are there any harmful, hurtful and unjust ways that you, and we, need to turn away from in order to return to the ways of God?

In addition to the call for repentance, John's ministry also acted as a message of promise and anticipation. His anticipation proclamation was summarized by Mark this way: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop

down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you the with Holy Spirit." I like the way a Catholic resource summarizes today's Gospel reading in the context of the Season of Advent:

Advent is the season we Christians step into the sandals of the Baptizer. His anticipation becomes ours. His words of reform become our imperative to repent. His austerity becomes the challenge to straighten the roads to our hearts.

This is a great way to approach this story. In fact, I think it is a legitimate question for each of us to ask of ourselves, and of this congregation: How are you, how am I, how are we, preparing the way of the Lord? In other words: **How are we living out and sharing the realm of God in our midst?**

I want to return for just a moment to that great image of highway construction – of straightening and smoothing out roads, filling valleys and leveling hills. Almost 60 years ago, biblical commentator William Barclay interpreted Isaiah's and John the Baptist's road construction analogy in the following, and still very relevant way, **"Fill up the valleys of ignorance, bring down the mountains and hills of stubborn prejudice and pride."** More recently, reflecting the issues of economics and social status, the Rev. Grant Gallup suggested, **"Fill up the valleys of poverty, pull down the mountains of privilege, selfishness, and greed."** I know we could come up with many more examples of valleys and hills that need to be dealt with in our own lives, in our neighborhoods, city, state, nation, and in the world. So, in further applying this road construction metaphor to yourself, reflect upon the following questions in the days and weeks ahead:

- **What are the valleys in your life that need to be filled?**
- **Which mountains in your life need to be leveled?**
- **What rough places in your life need to be made smooth?**
- **What crooked pathways in your life need to be straightened out?**

As you may have heard, I've taken this message to heart in a big way this past week. I realized that there was some serious road construction and repair needed in my life. So I took action to straighten [I'm not sure that's the right word] and smooth out some roads, fill some valleys and level some hills. We'll see how that turns out. And I guess an important step that remains is saying from behind this pulpit, as I did publically at our Presbytery meeting last Tuesday, **"I am a Christian who is also gay."**

How awesome the day will be when that is no longer a statement that is fearfully made, nor considered newsworthy in a front-page article of a local newspaper!

I can assure you that whatever "road work" you feel is necessary in your life may not necessarily be easy. But perhaps it's essential, nonetheless. And remember, this can take many forms, like **treating others as equals and with respect as people of worth, promoting ways of peace and justice, sharing compassionately with those in need, developing loving and trusting relationships, or simply being the person you God created you to be. For in doing so, we, like John the Baptist, act not only as heralds of the kingdom of God in our midst, but also as participants in the ways of God!**

Continue, then, in thought, word, and deed, to prepare the way of the Lord.

Amen.