

Advent 2: December 5/6, 2009

Roadwork

Luke 3:1-14

John, son of Zechariah, went into all the country preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

Of what significance is the date: December 7? For students of American history it is "the day that will live in infamy", namely the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. But for contemporary interest December 7, 2009—tomorrow—is the date when the "New I-64" project is completed and opens to the public. Heralded and vilified at one and the same time, it was a major roadwork project that replaced 30 bridges, added an extra traffic lane, totally redesigned the conflicted I-64/I-170 interchange, and in general improved this major traffic artery between Spoede Road and Kingshighway.

Roadwork. Love it or hate it, it's a part of our world. But not just our world. Roadwork, with all due respect to Ben Franklin, probably deserves to be linked with death and taxes as certainties in this life. 2,000 years ago John the Baptist spoke of Advent preparation, and Luke, by inspiration, tied this preparation to roadwork. Specifically, roadwork that Isaiah the prophet declared was necessary to prepare the way for the Lord. Christmas is 19 days from today. You certainly know where you stand with gifts and decorations, parties and festivities. Do you know where you stand in preparing the way for the Lord? Let's talk about it. Roadwork.

Four road conditions are identified this morning, each of which must be addressed if we are to be properly prepared for Christmas. Each presents a hazard, each produces a response, each requires a repair. We take them one by one. The first is *valleys*. "Every valley shall be filled in." Old highway 67 between Fredericktown and Poplar Bluff has some major league hills and valleys as it winds through the Ozark foothills. Drive it today and you will see a massive earth-moving project underway as they level the hills and raise the valleys. Valleys in the Bible are ominous places, places where death reigns. In the Good Shepherd psalm we are prepared to traverse the "valley of the shadow of death" because our Good Shepherd goes with us. In Ezekiel's vision he is brought into the middle of a valley and it is full of dry bones. We begin Advent preparation by acknowledging that we are dry bones, that we come from the valley of the shadow of spiritual death. *Fill our cups, O Lord, this Advent season, for our lives are dry, our cares overwhelm, and we have lost our way. God fills our valleys.* "They will come back with weeping," declares God. "I will lead them on a level path where they will not stumble." "I am the way," says Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me." We trust Jesus to be who he says he is, to do what he promises to do. And our valleys are filled in.

Road hazard number two is *mountains and hills*. "Every mountain and hill [will be] made low." Mountains present incredible challenges to travel. Testimony to that is Atigun Pass through which the Alaska pipeline and the Dalton Highway must pass. It threads its way through the Brooks Range, the only mountain chain that lies entirely above the Arctic Circle. We drove the Dalton Highway to the Arctic Circle and can testify to the ruggedness of the way and the intimidation of the mountains. In the Bible mountains are places where the Law is revealed. God revealed his holy Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, to which the people responded with fear and trembling. *Why?* Because the Law reveals our sin. Sin which requires a sin payment. Abraham is told to go to another mountain—Mount Moriah—and there sacrifice his only son Isaac. Mountains are fearful places, shrouded places, whether it be by smoke on Sinai or clouds on Denali. In Advent preparation we acknowledge our sinfulness, that we are the "brood of vipers" that John castigates. When our lives are held up to the scrutiny of God's holy Law, they are found to be full of shallow thankfulness, petty greed, and deep-seated selfishness. *Lord God,*

*we repent of our waywardness this Advent season. Restore us by your life giving word of forgiveness. **God levels the mountains.*** “I will go before you,” he declares, “and I will level the mountains.” So Jesus ascends the Mountain called Calvary. He carries the weight of our sin and holds it up to the scrutiny of God’s holy Law. Our sin is as a brood of vipers and it is dealt with according to lawful judgment. Jesus’ breath is crushed from his body and his life is forfeit. In so doing the mountain is made low. And forgiveness of sins flows freely down upon us.

The third road hazard is *crooked roads*. “The crooked roads shall become straight.” It’s always a challenge driving to my Mother’s home in north central Arkansas. *Why?* Because once you leave Pocahontas, Arkansas, you enter a hundred mile stretch of some of the most twisted and turning roads in the Midwest. You can forget about making good time on this stretch, and that’s assuming you don’t run into ice, flooded roads or fog. Scripture describes crooked roads as places where evil prospers. “The wicked have turned their paths into crooked roads,” says Isaiah; “no one who walks in them will know peace.” To which the psalmist adds, “Those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with evildoers.” Our Advent preparation continues as we repent of our sin by turning away from the dark places in our lives. We all have these dark places—crooked roads—that take us to places where we are ashamed to go. It should not be so. It need not be so. Restored in the forgiveness of sins, you have within you a power which is greater than the power of sin. It is the power of the Holy Spirit. By his power we turn from these dark places and onto his straight way. *Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness—make straight your way before me. **God straightens crooked roads.*** So Jesus reaches down to lift up those with twisted limbs, to heal those with broken spirits, to restore all through his life-giving word. We go forth straightaway from this place with the resolve that he goes before us and with us.

Our last road hazard is *rough roads*. “The rough ways shall become smooth.” Between Chicken, Alaska, and Dawson City, Yukon Territory, is the roughest road I have ever driven. We were warned not to drive it. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* Do you have a full mounted spare? Better to have two! It was good advice. We blew out and destroyed one tire on the rough shale stone that paved the roadbed. After that we crawled along the balance of the way into Dawson City. The Bible describes rough roads as places where we stumble and fall. “We stumble in many ways,” says James. Ezekiel describes one such hazard when he says, “their silver and gold has made them stumble into sin.” So the people come to John the Baptist and ask, “What should we do?” John minces no words in pronouncing proper Advent preparation. *Share with those less fortunate. Practice honesty in business dealings. Find contentment in God’s provision.* He calls these “fruit in keeping with repentance.” Good fruit. Fruit produced by the lives of God’s people, who are branches of the true vine, Jesus Christ our Advent King. “O upright One, you make the way of the righteous smooth.” ***God resurfaces rough roads.*** “I am the vine, you are the branches,” says Jesus. “If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.” Advent preparation involves producing fruit in keeping with repentance.

The community has been invited to walk the new I-64 roadway this afternoon, before it opens for traffic tomorrow. History will teach us that this has been one of the more successful civic projects of recent memory. When next you drive the new I-64, I want you to remember that proper Advent preparation involves *Roadwork*: repentance for the forgiveness of sins and production of fruit in keeping with repentance. Such *Roadwork* carries with it a great blessing: You will see God’s great salvation, which has come to us in the gift of his Son, Emmanuel. God bless your Advent preparation with *Roadwork*. Amen.