

Service Date: December 13, 2020

Sermon Text—Mark 1:1-8

In the 4th chapter of his prophecy, Malachi described the coming of the Lord on the Last Day. He warned that it would be a day of terrible destruction for the ungodly and unbelieving, but declared that that same day would be a day of celebration for God's people. He used a lively picture to describe the joy of God's people on that day. He said: "You will go out and jump around like calves (released) from the stall." You don't really know what that means until you have spent time quarantined. When the day of deliverance comes you want to jump around like a calf released from the stall. Or maybe you just drive around. And I did. I happened to go up to the north side and saw the progress that had been made on the interstate heading out of town toward Madison. There is some work left to go, still some heavy equipment to be seen and some reduced speeds to watch for, but it is coming along great. Why do I mention the road construction and the progress being made on it? Because it brings to mind the great Advent cry of the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptizer: Prepare The Way Of The Lord. They are talking about road construction and calling on us to do some of our own. So today, on this 3rd Sunday in Advent, let us see the road that needs repair, use the construction equipment required and enjoy the presence that will be received.

I. Prepare The Way Of The Lord, see the road that needs repair

The picture of preparing the way for the Lord comes from the practice begun in ancient times and still done today of preparing for the arrival of heads of state or important people. Still to this day, well in advance of the President's arrival in a place there are feverish preparations made. Barricades are put up to block traffic, buildings are checked for security, when President Ford came to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, when I was a kid they gave a bath to all the cows on the farm he was going to visit.

In Isaiah's prophecy which we read, the road is being prepared for the Lord. Remember that Isaiah writes in anticipation of the Babylonian captivity of God's people. 600 years before Christ was born the people of Judah and Jerusalem were carried off 500 miles from home to Babylon, where they would spend 70 years. During those long years God's people were bound to wonder if they would ever be released and return home. So Isaiah writes to comfort them and he pictures the Lord leaving his city of Jerusalem, where he was considered to live in the temple and heading for Babylon. But there is desert between Babylon and Judah and so Isaiah cries out to God's people to prepare the way, to get ready for the Lord to come to deliver them. To pull down the high places, the hills and mountains and to fill in the low spots the valleys and potholes. The idea is that the Lord will surely come and the people are to be ready. But clearly the preparations to be made are not really in the Arabian Desert—the real preparations are to be made in the hearts of God's people.

And the deliverance of the exiles in Babylon was but a faint foreshadowing of a far greater deliverance—the one the Lord himself would carry out by coming to this earth to save his people from their sins. And so when the time came for God to carry out that rescue mission John the Baptizer appeared on the scene. When word of this guy with uncut hair, wearing a camel hair robe and living on locusts and honey began trending, the crowds of people from Judea and Jerusalem went to him. Each of those people had a spiritual road that needed repair. Although our reading is merely a summary of John's ministry, think of what you know about his work from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. We know that on the one hand there were the religious leaders of the Jews who came out to John. They did not come to be baptized by him; they didn't think they needed a

baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They were proud that they could trace their lineage back to Abraham and felt as descendants of that great man they were good enough for God. We know that John talked to Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He had divorced his wife in order to marry the wife of his brother Philip who had left him. He was the king. Who needs a Savior, who needs to stoop to confess sin when you are the King? Then there were the common people who came to John; the publicans, the sinners, the unwashed masses, "the weary and burdened" as Jesus called them. Those who were not hypocritical enough to think they were good enough to stand before God on their own merits, but who were never pointed in faith to the promised Savior and the forgiveness of sins he would bring them. They doubted, were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, they lacked faith. So there again you see a road in need of repair. Hills of pride and self-righteousness that needed to be pounded down; valleys and low places of doubt and despair that needed to be filled in; the road was in need of repair.

And so it still is to this day. Heart Road can easily be rendered impassable to our Lord by pride and doubt. How easily in our proud times which question God's right to speak in absolute terms about right and wrong; when churches and individuals set themselves up as judges over God's Word picking and choosing and voting on what to believe and do and what to reject and ignore; when mankind hails its achievements and accomplishments in medicine and science and asks, "Who needs God?"; how easily that kind of pride can enter our hearts too. How easily we have been blessed with a Christian education, membership and participation in a Christian church, attendance in worship; how easily we can think like the Jewish leaders that that's enough, we have Luther for our father! Or it goes the other way. We know our sins and wonder if there can be forgiveness and full pardon for us; we see the woes and worries that fill our world and wonder if things will ever get back to normal, we hear others talk about Jesus as if he were only a human being, a prophet and teacher and example like others before him and after, but nothing beyond that and doubts enter in. Suddenly the road to our hearts too is rendered impassable by potholes and sinkholes and pavement that has heaved and buckled. That is the road that needs to be repaired if the Savior is to enter, and to do that we need to use the equipment that's required.

II. Prepare The Way Of The Lord, using the construction equipment required

We've all spent enough time waiting in traffic during the summer road construction season to know that some very special equipment is required to make a decent smooth, straight road. We have seen the jackhammers and crushers that smash the damaged portions, and the earthmovers and graders and bulldozers that prepare the road bed and the pavers and rollers that put down the new surface. In the same way the Lord knew that it would take special equipment to fix the road leading to the hearts of his people. So he sent his prophet Isaiah. And what did he tell him to do? You heard it. "A voice said: 'Cry out!'" What did God send his prophet to do? Preach. What is the special construction equipment required to repair heart road? The Word of God in which God speaks in two ways. First there is the law. The law is like the jackhammer that pounds down and pulverizes the high places; then there is the gospel that comforts and fills the valleys with faith and peace and hope and joy.

And John came with the same tools. He preached God's law. To the proud descendants of Abraham he said: "You brood of vipers, your real father is Satan. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Do not say, 'We are Abraham's descendants,' for out of these rocks God can raise

up children for Abraham." To Herod he said: "You may be called King by people here, but the God of heaven says you are a sinner and headed for hell." But to those who came confessing their sins he preached Jesus. He pointed to him and called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He said: "This is the one who comes after me, but who is preferred ahead of me because he was before me." Those who confessed their sins he baptized with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John used the tools God provided, his Word in law and gospel, baptism.

And we still have that heavy equipment; let's use it to repair Heart Road. When high places of pride appear and we want to congratulate ourselves for our much outstanding service to our God, let us hear the Scriptures say: "We have together become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." When we want to get smug and think that we aren't like others, let's hear Scripture say: "There is no difference...no one living is righteous before you." When we can't think of any sins, then let's start with that one: making God a liar, for he says, if we say we have no sin we make him out to be a liar. When we want to get all smug and congratulate ourselves on how well we are getting along during these difficult days while others crumble under the stress and strain and we begin to wonder why we need God, let us hear what the Lord said to the wealthy and satisfied people of Laodicea: "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." And when doubt and despair and fear take hold, and we think our troubles are the result of God's wrath and anger, then let us look where John points; to Jesus the eternal Son of God, who came to earth to be the sacrificial Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world by his death on the cross. Let us look to our baptism which though it took place long ago continues to assure us of our forgiveness before God and our status as children of God and heirs of heaven. Let's come to the Lord's Supper and receive with bread and wine the body and blood of our Savior and hear him say: "Given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." We can't produce the repentance it takes to repair the road that leads to our hearts by ourselves it takes God to work sincere sorrow for sin and to fill the heart with faith, and he does that still by Word and baptism. Let us hear and learn that Word, return daily to our baptism, partake of our Savior's Supper and prepare the way of the Lord and when we do we will

III. Enjoy the presence that will be received

Road construction and repair can be kind of pain, right? Slowing down, stopping, waiting in traffic; construction season isn't easy. But usually the reward makes it worth the effort. When it is done the road is smooth, you don't have to dodge potholes or slow down for or get rattled by bumps and humps. The same is true of our spiritual road work. It can be painful. To make preparation for the coming of the Savior by solemn contemplation and confession of sin and by deliberate turning to the cross in humble faith isn't easy when the world is partying. The world rushes past God's house and God's Word without a care, to take the time for preparation of the heart isn't easy. The world parties and uses the season as an excuse for excess and self-indulgence, to practice self-control and moderation isn't easy. The world knows nothing of self-examination and repentance; it has no time for sorrow over sin and turning from it back to God and his Word. It isn't easy to prepare the way of the Lord, but the rewards are great.

Listen to John the Baptist. "After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Don't misunderstand John. He was himself a great man. His coming and

work was prophesied in the Old Testament. An angel announced his birth. His baptism was a powerful means of grace—it was a baptism connected with repentance which resulted in the forgiveness of sins. Jesus said of John's baptism: "No one can enter the kingdom of heaven unless he is born of water and the Spirit." But as great as John was a greater would come after him. John was merely preparing the way for the One who after completing his redeeming work would pour out his Spirit on all people. That according to the Old Testament prophets one of the great works and identifying marks of the coming of the promised Messiah would be that he would pour out the Holy Spirit on all people. In the 12th chapter of Zechariah's prophecy, the Messiah speaks through the prophet and says: "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace, who pleads for mercy. Then they will look at me, the one they have pierced." The One they pierced is our Lord Jesus. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit began on the day of Pentecost and continues to this day where the Word is preached, Baptism administered and the Supper is served. It is that far greater One, the Son of God and Promised Savior, who will travel Heart Road and enter with his presence.

No, the presence he brings will not be not sweaters and smart phones, not ties and tablets, not luxury cars or laptop computers; the gift the Savior brings is his own presence. It was that presence of the Savior that St. Paul prayed God to give the Christians in Ephesus when he told them it was his desire for them "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith and that you may know the love of God and how wide and long and high and deep it is." Think of Psalm 24, which speaks of the presence of Christ in the heart as well and urges God's people to lift up the gates to let him in. It calls him the King of glory, the Lord strong and mighty. Who couldn't use his presence in the heart especially at this time of year, when schedules are full and budgets are tight and expectations are impossibly high and loneliness is amplified and sickness and depression don't stop. This is the gift the Savior will bring—the gift of his own presence.

Presence that cheers us with the love of Christ that brought him to earth so we could rise to heaven; presence that cheers us with the peace of God that passes all understanding, that no one can buy or find anywhere except in Christ, presence that cheers the lonely with the promise: "I am with you always," presence that brings joy that endures even though everything may not be just quite right this Christmas because it's joy in the Lord. Yes, the hard work of preparing the way for the Lord is well worth the effort for he'll come to us, live in us and bless us just as the prophet Isaiah said: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint."

So we are in the Advent season—a time of preparation. This Advent is certainly a little different. You have heard the warnings about family gatherings. Maybe you aren't planning to have the usual guests this Christmas. But there will be one guest whose coming no virus can prevent—that is our Advent King and Savior. As always, he comes and longs to enter our hearts and homes. Prepare the Way for him. You see the road that needs repair...it's the one that leads to your heart, you know the construction equipment that's required—the Word of God with its crushing message of law and sin, and its comforting message of forgiveness and peace, use it and you will enjoy the presence that will be received—the presence of God's Son our Savior who comes with his gifts of strength and peace and joy and hope. Amen.

