**Build a Highway: Forgiveness**

**11-28-21**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent.

* That season of the traditional Church year that is meant as a call to prepare for the celebration of Christmas.
	+ Not preparation of our homes or our calendars or even our gifts – which is our normal preparation mode this time of year.
	+ But the preparation of us.
		- Our hearts, our attitudes, our pace, our depth.
		- These preparations are far harder and require greater intentionality than anything other preparations that might be required of us.
		- For they will often run contrary to the onslaught of activity and frenetic pace that usually accompany the season.
* But it is this preparation that sets Christmas apart from whatever the holiday is that is celebrated by our culture this time of year.
	+ A holiday that has all the markings of Christmas, except one: the coming of the earth-shaking, life-transforming, eternally-ruling, Prince of Peace.
		- This cultural holiday is infused with insipid sentimentality instead of Divine intervention.
			* All about cooing babies and fuzzy lambs mixed with cuddly reindeer and cute little drummer boys.
			* No where demanding that we stop to consider how the coming of the Creator in human flesh might change things – or even change us.
	+ Advent was set a part to challenge all that – established at a time when “all that” was far less pervasive and powerful.
* Perhaps this is why the Scriptures use such vivid and impossible language to describe just what preparations are called for if we are to truly be transformed by the coming of the Messiah.
	+ For at the advent of the Christ just prior to the first century in Palestine, the expectations of the Messiah were just as shrouded in illusion and delusion as Christmas is in our culture today.
		- But rather than being beset with sentimentality and consumerism, the Messianic hope was corrupted by bigotry and triumphalism.
		- The Jews were anticipating a Messiah that would vindicate their cause and overwhelm the Gentile world.
			* Defeating the pagan Romans on the battlefield…
			* And establishing Israel as the dominant world power forevermore.
			* A perch from which they would enjoy exercising judgement and dispensing retribution.
			* The coming of Messiah would be the ultimate payback.
* But that wasn’t God’s Messianic plan at all, so before He sent His Son, He sent a messenger who would “prepare the way of the Lord” – his name was John.
	+ And just as Jesus’ coming was announced to Mary before his conception in Luke 2, so John’s conception and call was announced to his father, Zechariah, the priest, in Luke 1, where we read:

*8 Now while Zechariah was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just,* ***to make ready for the Lord a people prepared****.”*

* + John was sent to prepare the way for the Lord – that is, the coming Messiah.
		- Not to prepare for conquest, as the Messianic hope of the day was anticipating.
			* John was not sent to rile up the masses and begin to secretly raise an army.
			* He was not sent to sew the seed of sedition and begin to form sleeper cells in the halls of Roman power.
		- No, John was sent to prepare the hearts of the people.
			* To call them to humility and repentance before God and His anointed one.
			* His mission statement is stated fairly clearly in Luke 3:3-6 where we read:

*3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

*“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,[a]*

 *make his paths straight.*

*5 Every valley shall be filled,*

 *and every mountain and hill shall be made low,*

*and the crooked shall become straight,*

 *and the rough places shall become level ways,*

*6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

* John had his work cut out for him and faced significant resistance from the powers that be.
	+ For people didn’t want a humble Messiah who would save the world.
		- They wanted an angry one that would conquer it on their behalf.
		- They wanted to stand on the top of the heap for a change and watch their former overlords suffer.
	+ A Messiah Wh taught love, humility, service and forgiveness was not in their wheelhouse.

But the truth is, He isn’t in our wheelhouse either.

* Things have not changed so much today.
	+ Though Christianity is still the dominant religious tradition in American culture today, it is not the dominant “religion”.
		- That would be a religious secularism that places humanity on the top rung of the ladder, not God.
			* It’s a form of humanism that pretends to leave a place for God for the weak and feeble minded…
			* And even accommodates traditional religious celebrations, like Christmas, so long as they can be watered down to vague notions of the innocence of a baby, peace on earth, and the value of traditions that keep us busy and happy.
		- Now, I would expect nothing less from a secular culture that Ephesians 6:12 tells us is in the grip of *the cosmic powers over this present darkness* ruled by *spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*.
			* Of course, the enemy of God will seek to dilute and dissipate the influence of the work of God, first by accommodation and then later, by domination.
			* We can see this process first-hand.
* No, the problem is not with the powers of darkness – they have already been defeated, they just don’t know it yet.
* The problem is with Christ’s Church which seems either to: choose to
	+ Accept the world’s accommodations of Christmas,
		- Accepting the meek and mild baby in the manger (to the point that we can hardly use the word “Savior” anymore)
		- And go along with the dewy sentimentality and vague good wishes that now accompany the holiday.
	+ Or, we go to the other extreme, seeking to forcefully reassert the real “reason for the season” in the culture.
		- Engaging in a culture war for “peace on earth” by all means necessary.
	+ Either way, Satan wins.
		- For to accommodate the cultural version of Christmas is to miss out on the transformational power of Christ in us and in the world.
			* Both weakening the Church and diminishing her light on the Earth.
		- But to seek to reassert the Messiah’s Kingdom by force seems eerily similar to the Jewish conception of the Messianic hope just before Jesus’ coming so many years ago.
			* An effort, it should be noted, that has historically proven futile as has been seen in both the Jewish Revolt against the Romans and the Christian Crusades against the Muslims.
* No, just as God’s people at the time of Jesus’ birth needed to be prepared to received *God’s* Anointed One (rather than only enjoy the One of their own imaginations).
* So, today, Christ’s church also needs to continually prepare ourselves to receive the Anointed One on HIS terms and to allow Him to not just save our souls, but also to transform our lives here and now.
	+ Or as has been repeated frequently over the past several weeks: We need to be prepared to turn from our wicked ways and seek His will, His way.
	+ Ahh, you were thinking we had gotten off of that whole thing. But friends, we cannot: for this is the essence of all discipleship.
		- Seeking to live out God’s will God’s way.
		- And I go on and on about it because while it is key, it is also hard.
		- How hard?
			* Isaiah says it is as hard as building a highway through the mountains.

So just how hard is it to build a highway through the mountains? Ask the Idaho Transportation Department.

* Most of you know that they have been working for about two years now on simply widening a short stretch of Highway 55 between Smith’s Ferry and the Rainbow Bridge.
	+ A project that will not be completed for at least another year.
	+ Well, a few days before Thanksgiving, part of the mountain they have been working on gave way and slid down onto the highway.
		- Now they’re trying to figure out how to get the highway safely open again before winter sets in.
			* Not an easy task given that the slide dropped some 200 feet and impacted 250 feet of roadway.
		- But you may not realize that this is the second time this project has been halted due to a rock slide.
			* Back in March there was a major slide that covered the roadway as well, slowing the project and snarling traffic.
		- And this is just a half-mile roadway through a mountain pass already cut out by a river.
* Maybe the Swiss have a better idea.
	+ For them, rather than going over or around a mountain, they decided to go under it.
		- And in 2016, after digging and blasting for 14 years and spending more than 13 billion dollars, they opened up the Gotthard Base train tunnel under the Gotthard Massif range in the Alps.
		- At 35 miles long and sitting more than 8,000 feet beneath the tallest peaks enroute, it is both the longest and deepest tunnel on earth.
			* In fact, the tunnel is so deep that the ambient temperature in some of the deepest parts of the tunnel reach 115 degrees without ventilation.
* Suffice it to say that even with today’s scientific knowledge and advanced technology, building a highway (or a railway) through the mountains is a painstakingly hard, unbearably long, and inherently dangerous undertaking.
	+ Now imagine trying to do it in Isaiah’s day.
		- Here is the imagery God uses to describe the process of preparing the way for the Lord. (Is. 40:3-5)

*A voice cries:*

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;*

 *make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

*4 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.*

*5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,*

 *and all flesh shall see it together,*

 *for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Now as crazy as this all sounds, the idea is not without precedent in Isaiah’s day.

* Historically, before ancient Kings or Queens, along with their entourage, would visit a region of their domain they would send emissaries to prepare the way for them.
	+ And this would not include just setting up speaking engagements and high-level meetings.
	+ In those days, it also included fixing the roads that would get them there.
		- The entourage would be large and bring a lot of supplies necessary for a King and Queen.
		- Plus, Monarchs were important, busy, and pampered people, so speed and comfort were of utmost importance.
	+ Thus, these emissaries would make sure the roads were cleared of rubble and debris and the rough places and potholes were smoothed out.
		- Using slave labor to do it, of course.
	+ There are even records that indicate that in certain instances, hollows were filled in and some steeper inclines were shaved off in order to facilitate the Royal travel.
* But what Isaiah describes here is that kind of preparation on steroids.
	+ When he says, build a highway for our God, through mountain and valley, he does not envision building a road over the mountains, nor does he contemplate going around mountains or even tunneling under them.
	+ Rather, Isaiah writes, make a straight road, a direct route, straight through the mountains on which the Messiah can pass.
		- Pulverize the heights, fill in the valleys, clear out the boulders, smooth out the desert.
		- Create a road that not even we in our day could build, or if we could would take centuries and cost everything we have.
	+ And, to where?
		- To where is this impossible road leading?
			* To what is perhaps the most inaccessible place on the face of the earth – our hearts.
			* That place so well guarded and concealed that often we don’t even know it ourselves.
			* Jeremiah 17:9 tells us:

*9 The heart is deceitful above all things,*

 *and desperately sick;*

 *who can understand it?*

* + - * Yet, at the same time, the writer of Proverbs 4:23 tells his son:

*23 Above all else, guard your heart,*

 *for from it flow the springs of life.*

God knows that our heart is the place from which we live out our lives.

* This is why He calls us to *trust the Lord your God with all your heart*.
* And to *love the Lord your God with all our heart*.
* For it is only in Christ, our Messiah, that our hearts will not be troubled, but instead will find the peace of God that transcends all understanding.

And so, He calls upon all of us to prepare the way for the Lord to enter and transform our hearts.

* This isn’t the same thing as our salvation.
	+ When as children we were encouraged to “ask Jesus into our hearts.”
		- That language speaks of an act of grace forgives our sins and adopts us into the family of God.
		- But for many believers, it goes no further.
			* We don’t understand that God doesn’t want to just save us for eternity.
			* He wants to re-create us in the here and now.
				+ To set us free from everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles us.
		- But to do that, He needs access to our hearts.
* Now, honestly, we don’t like to go there.
	+ In fact, we tend to think that the way to our transformation is through the reformation of our behaviors.
		- That if we can stop sinning in our thoughts or attitudes or actions, then we are being transformed.
		- But that’s kind of like just clearing the trees and boulders off the mountain side.
		- Yes, it can help us create a winding road of ups and downs in our walk with the Savior.
		- We might be able to get some nice straight stretches, like the passing lanes on Highway 55…
		- Only to be slowed to a standstill by a rockslide that closes the road for some time.
* No, though we might not like it, what we need is a new heart.
	+ This is what God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel spoke of in Ezekiel 36:26 when he said:

*26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my just decrees.*

* + - Or, if I might paraphrase,

*27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in [my will and my ways].*

* This Advent season, we need to prepare the way of the Lord by cooperating with the Holy Spirit in pulverizing the whole mountain that stands between Christ and the total transformation of our hearts.
	+ Only then can the deep dark valleys that keep us bound up in the deceptions of our own hearts be filled in.
	+ And only then can the transforming power of Christ’s Holy Spirit directly impact our hearts.

But how?

* We cannot move mountains.
	+ No, but in faith, Christ can.
	+ He has all the heavy equipment that is needed to pulverize the mountains that hide our hearts from Him.
		- All we need to do is first, identify the mountains that are standing in the way.
		- And then, learn how to operate the heavy equipment God has supplied to blast those things to hell so that we might experience the transforming power and peace of God in our hearts.
* And that’s what this advent season is going to be all about.
	+ First, identifying the mountains that may be standing in the way – things like unforgiveness, pride, discontentment and so on.
	+ And then learning to operate the heavy equipment that will blast away and open a highway for our God straight into our hearts.

But we’ll begin that highway project next week.

**Benediction:**