

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 5, 2021 (2nd Sunday in Advent, Year C)
Luke 3:1-6
Philippians 1:3-11

What would you do if you found out that someone important was coming to see you? Let's say the President of the United States would be coming to YOUR house for a visit. Okay, considering how people have felt about our last 2 presidents, whichever President you actually LIKE. What would you do to get your house ready? How would you dress for the occasion?

What if the President was coming to AITKIN? What would we do to the CITY to prepare for his visit?

I have a friend who gave a talk about his mission trip to Senegal. On one of his slides he pointed out the paved road going through the town of Lengere. He said it was BUILT because the PRESIDENT of the country came for a VISIT one year, and the town wanted something BETTER for him to drive on than just dirt.

That's what we DO when someone IMPORTANT is coming into our lives—we prepare. We get OURSELVES READY.

That's what Advent is ABOUT—preparing for someone very IMPORTANT to come to us. That's what the Gospel was referring to when it quoted from Isaiah:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

We get the song “Prepare the Royal Highway” from this passage. We prepare the way in our HEARTS for Christ's coming.

What we need to THINK about is HOW we prepare our hearts, how we BUILD that highway. According to this gospel reading, we build it through John's baptism—“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Now “repentance” is ANOTHER one of those words we don't use much outside church, so what does it MEAN? Repentance isn't just about feeling SORRY, or even JUST about what we DO and DON'T do. The word LITERALLY means “a change of mind.”

To prepare the way for God, we need to change our MINDS. About what? Well, notice how the voice in the WILDERNESS DEFINES preparing the highway – it's in terms that are IMPOSSIBLE for US to meet.

“Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth.”

Those are all steps that are required for building the highway, but they're IMPOSSIBLE for us to do on our own. It seems that God is telling us that we need to give up this idea that we can do it by OURSELVES.

We like to think that we're JUSTIFIED before God, that we can IMPRESS God, by simply living good lives. We think we're pretty good people because we obey the commandments...MOST of the time. We aren't as bad as those OTHER people, those SINNERS.

But the problem with THAT kind of repentance is that it DOESN'T seek GOD'S help. We still think, “I can't DO this. I can do it MYSELF.” Our minds HAVEN'T been changed.

I think that's the reason Jesus had so much trouble with the scribes and Pharisees, because they were doing pretty WELL by themselves. They were living good, moral, obedient lives, at least THEY thought so.

But the sinners and the tax collectors that Jesus hung out with, THEY were VERY aware that they DIDN'T measure up to God's or society's standards. They knew that they COULDN'T do it by themselves. They needed HELP. So repentance is admitting to yourself and to God, "I CAN'T do this. I CAN'T do it by myself."

This goes deeper than just trying to make yourself right with God. Most of us need help just getting through the day. That's why 12-Step programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous, are so successful. The first step of ALL 12-Step programs is acknowledging that I CAN'T do it by myself. They admit that they are powerless over their addictions -- that their lives have become unmanageable. They realize they need a higher power to help them. They depend on the care and support of the AA community. If they continue to think that they DO have some power over their drinking, recovery's very unlikely. But the more seriously they TAKE that first step, the more likely they are to follow through with the program and find the help they need.

Obviously, this isn't very easy. It's hard to "let go, and let God." Thankfully, the other side of confessing that "I can't" is believing that "GOD can." Repentance ENDS with the FORGIVENESS of sins, and only GOD can clear THAT road.

There was a time, when I was in college, when I really struggled with my faith. I wasn't sure what I believed, or what I was going to do with my life, or what God wanted from me. I think a lot of college students go through times of questioning like that. I went to a friend whose name was Peter. Peter was one of those special people that had a quite strength and peacefulness about him, and I just knew that God was with him. I trusted him. I told him how I was feeling, and all he said was a quote from our second reading today: "Reggie, 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.'"

For all these years, that verse has stuck with me, and it's become my FAVORITE verse in all of scripture. It sets me at ease. All my worries and anxieties about what I'M going to do aren't important. What's important is what GOD is doing. The only things that mean ANYTHING in my life are the things that GOD has started, and GOD will bring them to completion, God will FINISH them. My only job is to get out of the way, so God can work. I've always been thankful to Peter for teaching me that lesson.

God uses builders, like my friend Peter, to do road work. And like the enormous machinery that road crews use, God uses processes that we don't completely understand, but they're kind of fun to watch. God sightings. The machinery fills in valleys and levels mountains, and straightens curves and smoothes the way.

Of course, as we in Minnesota know all too well, this road construction can be a little inconvenient. In fact, it can be downright annoying. It can mean delays and wasted time, at least from OUR point of view. Sometimes it means we have to take a detour from the way we WANT to go. But we get through it because we know that someday it will be WORTH it, someday this road will be finished and, in the end, the way will be a lot SMOOTHER for us. It's a great metaphor, this road construction. "Prepare the way of the Lord."

But I don't want to give you the impression that WE are completely off the hook here. If God used OTHERS to build the road for US, who's God going to use to build the road for everyone ELSE? That's OUR job. God uses US.

That's why we're here in this place this morning. That's why we have Sunday School and Wednesday night Faith and Coffeehouse and Affirmation and Mentoring and Peer Ministry Training and Youth Group and Bible Study and Quilting and Days for Girls and Prayer Shawls and Parish Nurses and Altar Guild and Communion Ministers and everything else we do in this church. We're building roads for OTHERS, preparing the way of the Lord in the hearts of OTHERS. As the saying goes, "You may be the only Bible some people ever read."

EACH of us is a ROAD worker for God. Even as God prepares OUR hearts for his coming, God uses US to build roads for OTHERS, to fill THEIR valleys, tear down the obstacles, make the crooked straight, and smooth the way. What's impossible for us to do BY and FOR OURSELVES, IS possible for us to do for OTHERS, because God is WORKING, IN and THROUGH US.

And, people of First, hear these words: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." So let's get to work. Amen.