

"The Road Best Taken"

Luke 3:1-6

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"ROAD CONSTRUCTION AHEAD" -- people traveling home for the holidays will cringe at signs like that. Such signs usually mean traffic jams, long lines, slow speeds, and late arrivals. We Americans are peculiar people. We want wonderful, well kept, interstate speedways but we don't want to take any time to either build them or to maintain them in any way.

Over the last half of the century, 44,328 miles of interstate highways have been built in this country. By the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, the Roman government had constructed 49,000 miles of roads leading to and from Rome. During that time, the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist and in the wilderness he began preaching about highway construction. Taking his text from the prophet Isaiah, this is what he said: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, lift every valley, level every mountain, straighten every curve, smooth every rough place."

The Lord is coming and because the King of Kings is coming, we ought to build a super highway that He may have a straight way to the center of our hearts. You see, if God gets home to our home for Christmas, some spiritual road construction will need to take place. On this second Sunday of Advent, I invite you to visit again the sermon by John the Baptist for those words of his may in fact help us prepare for the coming of the King -- "Lift every valley."

The Christmas season at best is a paradox. These are days of great delight and the season of deep depression. There are houses full of cheer and humans full of despair. Expectations soar in December but so do suicides. Church attendance climbs. In December, we can compete with the Titans but so do the numbers of people who seek personal counseling.

The lead story on the Internet as I was preparing the sermon for this week was entitled "Holiday Survival for Divided Families." The introductory statement went something like this, "Jenna and Mario never dreamed the holiday season would become a nightmare for the next 15 years. Of course they never planned to divorce after having two kids either. So they offer advice now for smashed and toasted families over the holidays." You see, the Virgin Mary is not the only person of low estate at Christmas. The thought of spending time alone or the thought of spending time with family members that you really don't like is not a very inviting thought as we prepare for the holiday celebration.

Around 19% of America's teenagers, say they often feel like they would rather die than to go on living and people between the ages of 75 and 84 are twice as likely to commit suicide as teenagers. The young and the old are particularly vulnerable in December. I need to say to you today, if you are here in some valley, some valley so low, lift up your hearts to the Lord.

My favorite Christmas hymn is "Once in Royal David's City." It was written by Cecil Alexander in 1848. The third stanza goes something like this:

Jesus is our childhood's pattern,
Day by day like us He grew,
He was little, weak, and helpless
Tears and smiles like us He knew

And He feels for our sadness
And He shares in all our gladness.

If it's impossible for you to lift your own head, let other people help you. That's what a community is all about. There are people around you to help hold you and to lift you in these very difficult days of December. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, lift every valley."

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, level every mountain." A young stranger to the Alps was making his first climb, accompanied by two guides. It was a steep, hazardous ascent but all went well and he felt rather safe with a guide in front of him and another behind him. When at last they reached the summit, the lead guide, wishing to let the novice have that first taste of victory, stepped aside and let him lead the way to the top. The young climber, oblivious to the strong winds and gales that blow at the top of the summit, jumped to the top and threw his arms in the air, ready to shout. That's when the guide grabbed him with all of his might and pulled him back down and said, "On your knees, sir, on your knees. When you get to the top, you've got to remember to get on your knees." Therein lies a lesson for all of us who have made it to the top. It's not safe here, except on your knees. On your knees, my friends, on your knees.

When Harry Truman was thrust into the presidency by the death of Franklin Roosevelt, Sam Rayburn, his friend, took him aside and said, "Mr. President, from now on there are going to be lots of people around you and they're going to build a wall around you so solid nobody else can get to you. You'll only get the information that they want you to hear and they'll tell you everyday what a wonderful, great man and leader you are but, Harry, you and I both know you ain't so remember that when you're alone."

Have you discovered that people, all wrapped up in themselves, make mighty small packages? Meryl Streep, in an interview last winter upon her nomination for an Oscar, said, "It is sort of exhausting, this self-congratulatory atmosphere in which the movie community lives. It's unbearable. We are not that important to the world, but we think we are."

The prophet Isaiah had some words for self-sufficient people and in this setting where John took his text, the prophet of old raised some probing questions that I think are still relevant for the likes of you and me today. Listen to his questions: "Who can measure the heavens with the breadth of their hands? Who has understood the mind of God? Who can qualify as God's counselor? Who has taught God knowledge or showed Him the path of understanding? Do you not know; have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. His understandings no one can fathom. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, lift every valley, level every mountain, and prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight every curve."

You see, it seems to me that we've gotten used to some things in the last ten years or so that haven't been very good things to get used to. According to a USA Today survey, 48% of American workers admit to taking unauthorized or illegal actions in the past year. The types of things most likely done according to this survey were cutting corners on quality control, covering up incidences, abusing or lying about sick days, lying to or deceiving customers, putting inappropriate pressure on employees who are under them. For twenty years or so, I've been running the polls on this and I noticed that every time it comes out, the average person tells about 13 lies a week. Shoplifting is the major reason your Christmas presents cost so much. Cheating on schoolwork has now become the norm. Four out of five references to religion in the media is negative and as the

Cheshire cat says to Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, "If you don't care where you are going, it doesn't matter what road you take." If you do care where you're headed, there are principles that guide your practices in life.

This reminds me of the joke about the guy that jumped out of the airplane – about half way down he kept trying to pull his ripcord and couldn't get it to pull, he pulled the second time and still couldn't get it to go and he was feeling quite anxious. All at once, he saw a man coming up on the other side, and hope began to rise in him. As they passed in mid-air, he looked over at him and said, "Do you know anything about parachutes?" The guy going up says, "No, do you know about gas stoves?" An emergency is a poor time to read the instructions in life. The decision about what kind of ethical decisions I make and ethical course I will follow, I make in places like this as I sit and reflect on the powerful purposes of life and I need to say to you that God doesn't accept our crooked paths or whatever excuses we want to make.

The road best taken is the straight road to the Lord and so John comes preaching in the wilderness and what he preaches in the wilderness is a message of repentance for the remission of sins. To repent means to turn around. It means that I'm walking in this direction and I discover that it's the wrong way so I stop and I turn my direction to another way. That's the kind of road construction and journeys we need to take and make today.

I went to see my father on Friday of this week. My father never understood Carl Rogers's indirect counseling methods when we were growing up. When he had something to say, he just said it straight and sometimes it was rather intense. I remember that whenever we messed up in life, he only had two words for us and that was "straighten up!" Some of you nod, you've heard those words too when you were growing

up. I know we can create all kinds of circumstances for us today but I just want to cut to the chase and come straight at it. When it comes to abusing children, it's time to straighten up! When it comes to neglecting the poor, it's time to straighten up! When it comes to living in the midst of violence and pornography, it's time to straighten up! When it comes to the business of speaking the truth in business and dealing fairly with other people around us, it's just time to straighten up! Prepare ye the way of the Lord -- the King of Kings is coming, lift every valley, level every mountain, straighten every curve; you see, the ethical dilemma of America is an indictment on the church. If we're in a moral dilemma, it's our fault because we failed to give clear and direct signals for people.

Bishop Roy Short ordained me a couple of times in his life. He lived in Nashville for a long time serving with the Upper Room and served as Bishop after that. When I was just what he called a boy preacher starting out on this journey, I remember him saying, "When I just a kid in church growing up in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, I was taught that some things were right and some things were wrong, that some things are fair and other things are unfair and that some things are proper and other things are improper. It doesn't make any difference what's happening around me," and he was in his nineties when I heard him say it yet again. It doesn't matter what else is happening in the world, I keep going back to the Sunday school class where I was just a little kid down in Marcus Lindsey Church on Main Street in Louisville, Kentucky and I remember what that Sunday School teacher taught me.

Prepare the way for the Lord -- the King is coming! Lift up your head, level every mountain, straighten every curve, smooth every rough place.

A man called the highway department to complain about the potholes in front of his house. When he didn't get a response, he kept calling. When he still didn't get a response, he called even more. Finally, his persistence paid off. The Highway Department came out and put a big sign in front of his house that said, "Caution – Rough Road Ahead."

If you live long enough, your road will have its rough places. You'll have hurts you don't deserve and pain in your life. Some of it will be nothing of your doing. You can't help it. It will be circumstantial but others will come out of your choice but whatever the background of it, once you face it, you have a question to ask yourself. "What will I do with what has happened to me? What am I going to do with this hurt that's come into my life? Will I get bitter or will I get better? Will I make it rough on others or will I use this moment as a moment of redemption of myself and other people?" The choice is yours and mine. You see, resurfacing is costly and inconvenient, but is well worth it in the long run.

Kent Groff, in his book, *Journeyman*, says, "There's no wound without pain and no pain without anger and where a man's wound is, there his genius is likely to be." So our task is to offer our wounds to the Lord that the Lord may make us whole. Then he goes on to give us this advice, "If you're in one of life's potholes, pray your way out. Start praying the Psalms, they run the gamut of all your emotions. Write your way out. Start keeping a journal. If you're in some pothole, start talking your way out. Find a spiritual guide or a spiritual friend who will hold you accountable and love you unconditionally. If you're in some pothole, read your way out. Learn how people in the past have handled a similar situation that you're facing and how they found the healing of God. If you're in some pothole in life, work your way out of it. Don't suppress it but learn to work through creative sublimation. Who could have imagined a few years ago, that people wounded and crushed in the despair of losing a child

because of a drunken driver could change the cultural and social pattern of America to the point that *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* have done? Don't let your troubles go to waste. Use them better than that. Let God use them so that you may be redeemed not only for yourself but also for the sake of the world.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, the King is coming! Lift every valley, level every mountain, straighten every curve, smooth every rough place, for the King is coming to your house for Christmas. Get ready to welcome Him home. Amen.