

SERMON  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 6, 2009

Malachi 3:1-4

Psalmody: Luke 1:68-79

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

“Over the river and through the wood, to grandmother’s house we go!” Although this is actually a Thanksgiving song, it certainly brings back memories of this time of year for many of us. I can remember as a child traveling to my grandmother’s house a couple of weeks before Christmas. Our tradition was that we would go to pick her up, and bring her back to our house for the holidays.

She lived in a remote area in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In order to see her we certainly had to travel over rivers and through lots of woods. The roads were narrow and many times virtually uninhabited. They were usually snow covered. Sometimes the snow was so deep that we had to use chains on the tires to make it through.

Certainly, travel is an important part of the holiday season for many of us. But this isn’t anything new. Scripture tells us that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem. The Magi traveled a long distance so that they could see the baby Jesus who was to be King. Of course they didn’t have cars and roads to drive on like we do today.

However, even in our modern day, roads throughout our area have changed over time. I am told by some of our long-time members that they remember when FM 1960 was just a narrow two lane road through the trees with hardly any lights all the way to Hwy 59. Now look at it.

And just wait and see what it's going to look like in a few years. It is scheduled to be widened into six lanes, making driving even faster and safer. With better engineering over the years, roads often become smoother, more level, and straighter. We call this progress.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Luke tells us that Isaiah had prophesied similar progress on another road. Paths would be made straight. Valleys would be filled in. Mountains and hills would be leveled out. Rough ways would be made smooth.

Of course, these words of Isaiah were not meant to be taken literally. As Christians, we see these words as describing the paths we travel as we prepare to meet the Prince of Peace, Jesus, the Christ child.

Even though we would like for these paths to be easy and straight, there is no denying that mountains, low places, and crooked paths exist – both in the world, and in our own lives. Scripture tells us that the route to reaching the Prince of Peace can be a difficult road.

For along the way we will encounter mountains. These are the things in our lives that we have trouble getting past. They become barriers in our journey. They could be things like racism, homophobia, materialism, nationalism, addictions, and class distinctions. They stand as barriers between people and peace in many places in our world.

But God calls us to work at leveling the mountains in our lives. And not only that, but we are also called to serve as mountain guides in helping our neighbors navigate the mountains that stand in their path. Oh, I know that it is much easier to just go around those mountains in our lives.

It's easier to try and ignore them or think that they are not really barriers to our walk with God. But if we do this enough, we will indeed forget that they are even there. For we all know, it is a lot of work to tear down a mountain.

And then of course, in between the mountains, we find ourselves in the low places. We come upon people who are depressed or lonely.

We see people who are grieving, people who are oppressed or in need. We see the hungry, the naked, the homeless, and those in prison. These are the people who need to be raised up. Perhaps we can even see these people when we look in the mirror.

For people fall into pits of poverty, holes of oppression, and swamps of enslavement. And God calls us to fill those low places in and raise them up. They need our prayers, our love, our companionship, and our service.

Given all of the mountains and the low places in life that we cross through, it's easy to see why Isaiah describes how the way can be "crooked." It's easy to see how our road can twist and turn, and become a winding path.

Just like TexDOT works at straightening the turns in the roads, God calls us to work at straightening the winding paths that prepare us to encounter God.

And this brings us to the one called John the Baptist. John had a word for this straightening. He called it, "repentance." The word repentance is translated from the Greek word "metanoia." It means an "after thought", or "second thoughts."

You see, after a person has thought about something, first thoughts – first impressions change. After our emotions have faded – after we have looked at things from a new perspective, we are better able to think straight and see things better. Has that ever happened to you?

That's what is meant by "metanoia." It means a change of mind and heart. It signifies a new outlook and attitude that expresses itself in a change of behavior.

“Repentance” and “forgiveness of sin” are Luke’s favorite ways of summing up the effects of Christ in a person’s life. For Luke, it is clear that repentance, “metanoia,” goes hand in hand with forgiveness.

Therefore, we must confront our mountains in life and find ways to tear them down. We must face up to the low places and seek to raise them up. We are not to avoid them or pretend that they do not exist.

Okay, now it’s perfectly clear, we might think. We just need to try a little harder. We just need to tear down some of those mountains in our lives and fill in some of those valleys, and then we can create for ourselves a straight road to heaven.

“Oh what a wonderful God we have. We just need to repent a little bit like what John the Baptist said, and then it’s smooth sailing. God’s blessings will begin to overflow. Our health will improve, good things will start happening to us, and money will begin to come our way. It’s kind of like what it says in the fortune cookies we get at the Chinese restaurants.

This is a very popular way of thinking for many Christians, especially here in America. It is called a “theology of glory”.

But the truth is, is that there is still another obstacle on this straight road to heaven. As a matter of fact it is the ultimate obstacle. It is one that we cannot go around. It is one that we cannot tear down, or throw aside.

It is so daunting that it will make many turn back and say; “This obstacle is just too hard, I would rather go back to the crooked roads with the mountains and the valleys. “What is this obstacle,” you might ask? This obstacle is the cross.

You see, just when we think we've got it made. Just when we think that we have done enough good works to merit an entrance pass to heaven. Just when we've paid all of the tolls along the highway, we come face to face with our Lord hanging on a cross.

And it is at that point that we realize that it is not something that we go around, tear down, or ignore. Instead, we have no option but to throw ourselves down on the ground in front of that symbol of suffering and death.

We weep and we say; "I tried as hard as I could to make this journey by my own efforts, but I can't do it. Jesus, you are in the way." And Jesus looks down on us and says; "I am not in the way, I AM the way." "I will get you to where you need to go.

I will even carry you if need be. I will never leave you alone. Come with me, and I will show you the path. It doesn't mean that your journey will be without suffering. It doesn't mean that you will receive all sorts of worldly blessings along the way.

But it does mean that you will never again be alone. All I ask of you in return is your trust and your faithfulness. Here, take my hand."

This is what is called a "theology of the cross." It is directly opposite to a "theology of glory." It is a theology of pure grace.

You see, there are two kinds of religion in the world – a religion of law, sometimes called a "theology of glory. And then there is a religion of grace, which can be called a "theology of the cross."

Those who cling to a religion of law are like a young monkey who clings to his mother for dear life as she carries it around. A religion of grace is like a mother cat who picks up her kittens in their helplessness and carries them.

A religion of law produces a fearful, uncertain clinging to the proposition that if you just do the right things – if you just believe the right way – if you just try hard enough – if you just have the right positive attitude, you will be acceptable to God.

On the other hand, a religion of grace recognizes one's personal helplessness and inability to earn favor with God. The transforming good news is that through Christ, God rescues us in our helplessness. God lifts us out of the old life with its downward pull and frees us to live and serve by his love and grace.

Therefore, we can see this repentance and forgiveness that John is calling for, as good news. But it can only happen when we first encounter the cross.

Indeed there can be no life without the cross, since it IS the cross that drives us to repentance, and it is the THROUGH the cross that we are forgiven.

Reporter Terry Anderson was imprisoned in Lebanon for more than six and a half years, 2,454 days, ending in 1985. At first he was blindfolded most of the time and held in chains. He was losing his capacity to think.

When asked what he wanted, he replied that he wanted a Bible. An object thumped onto his bed. He was allowed to remove his blindfold and found a Bible. He began to read, starting with Genesis.

Terry Anderson was raised as a Roman Catholic but had not been practicing his faith for many years. That Bible was like a gift from heaven. He read and read, and thought about his life. He had lots of time to think.

He wanted to confess that he had hurt his first wife and daughter. He wanted to confess his many mistakes and his arrogance.

Later in the first year of his captivity, Terry Anderson became aware that other hostages were living next door. One was a priest, Father Lawrence Jenco. He asked the guards if he could see the priest. "I am a Catholic and I want to make a confession," he said. His captor agreed and Father Jenco gently encouraged him.

Terry Anderson began telling the priest of his sins. There was much to confess! A bad marriage, chasing other women, drunkenness. It was a tremendously emotional experience.

When he had finished, both he and Father Jenco were in tears. Father Jenco then laid his right hand upon Anderson's head and proclaimed, "In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are forgiven."

This was the turning point in Terry Anderson's life. He had come to the foot of the cross in his life. All of his own efforts had failed.

And so, his faith deepened. He began the process of turning around, leaving the darkness of his own doing and facing the light that can be found only in Christ. This is the power of repentance and forgiveness. This is the power of the cross.

Soon we will kneel before the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. We will begin again our journey that started in our baptisms. We will continue to run into mountains and valleys. We will continue to try and do things our own way.

But also remember that in doing so, we will continually come face to face with our Lord looking down on us from the cross. And it is there that we will see the ultimate love that God has for each and every one of us.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.