

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

LUKE 3

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth.

⁶And everyone will see the salvation of God.”



Dear friends, stop sinning. Don't sin. Just don't do it.

Long ago, when a king wanted to visit his realm, it was the duty of the people who were receiving him, to make the road ready for him. The people would have to bring shovel and pick-axe and wheelbarrow and fill in the potholes, smooth down the bumps. They were the king's people, under his protection. It was only proper that they should make his way ready...

In some parts of the world, people can still remember this. Our circuit pastor was a missionary to Africa, and he relays a story about a national park in another country. The road was terrible. It was a dirt road, not even gravel. Ruts were deeper than the clearance of most 4x4s, and the potholes sometimes long enough to fit an 18-wheeler. They hadn't even run a road grader down the road in over a decade.

Well, when the president of that country wanted to visit that national park one year, not only were there road graders but also dump trucks and front loaders! The new road was unrecognizable. What would not be done for the residents who lived there was done for one man who wanted to visit the place once.

Now that strikes our American democratic sensibilities as completely wrong. But it isn't without a point. When God comes to us proclaiming the comfort and peace we have in Jesus, the only proper, respectful way to receive that news is to do what Isaiah here says. Prepare yourself. Humble yourself. Consider your sin. Turn your crooked heart around and do the proper repairs for His coming.

WHEN THE LORD COMES NEAR ... HE HUMBLER HIS PEOPLE

We learn some history right at the start. Tiberius Caesar had succeeded Caesar Augustus. The sons of Herod the Great were ruling as tetrarchs, or subdivided kingdoms. Pilate was governor. Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas seemed to have been alternating the high priesthood from year to year. The official historical setup substantiates Luke's claims and heightens the ministry of John.

"The Word of God came upon John." This presents to us an exciting and momentous break from a long era without divine inspiration. John came to herald, or prepare the way before, through preaching. The last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, had promised God's messenger, to prepare the way before God Himself. He considered himself nothing more than a voice. Just a voice, yet this messenger would be God's megaphone, going out before Him. He is a herald and forerunner to get your act together. Luke tells us the messenger was John, often called John the Baptist.

This past summer, our city tore up our neighborhood road through a process of milling or planing, a giant machine that carved the face of the road right up and spewed it into big trucks. Before that, they set up signs to warn us about parking. They would on police authority tow any vehicle left parked at the curb during a certain week. The signs were a tad annoying, but it was nice to know before our vehicle was towed off or smashed by the road construction. So the Christ did not

arrive on the scene without warning. The God of heaven sent His messenger ahead of Christ to give the people due notice.

Not only did God send His messenger, but His prophet Isaiah had previously messaged that God would send His messenger. The message would be, “*Prepare the way of the Lord!*” This message is used to receive anybody spiritually. “Prepare the way” for Christ, that you are ready to receive Christ into the heart when He comes. The gospel is to have a smooth, level road before it. Nothing will stop the gospel or Christ from entering the heart. The obstacles are spiritual impurities; i.e., sin. The unevenness of human hearts is sin of many kinds: self-righteousness, worldly-mindedness, pride, arrogance, selfishness, etc.

Thus the first mention of any roadwork is with the word “*repentance.*” “Repent!” This is a word of changing one’s heart and mind. This is what John expected: a change in the hearts and minds of people. Their hearts were to be a spiritual highway, the entry of which is Christ’s coming. Some roads and states do not allow U-turns. On a roadmap, John’s “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” looks like a U-turn – to repent and turn away from sin and death.

The goal is not that the Lord has to swerve around the preferred sins of your heart. There is no room for both sin and holy God. Therefore, the Law of God comes first. First it is the duty of the Law to show the people the depth of their sin, the height of their folly, the crookedness of their life, and the roughness of the road they travel. After the people acknowledged their sins, John preached baptism to them for the forgiveness of sins.

We would never allow our esteemed guests opportunity to trip and fall. Ruts and ravines are no use to the royal highway. Nor steep ascents that the esteemed guests must trudge uphill. So the Christ is not meant to mount our sinful pride or stumble with us into dark unmentionable, backdoor deeds. What kind of heart do you offer Christ? Do you offer a crooked heart to Christ? Or is your heart washed up and a welcome home for the Christ child?

All obstacles in the roads that must be removed are sins of some kind: Some people live in a deep abyss and form the lowest class of sinners. Such are the harlots, fornicators, and unmentionable, backdoor sinners.

The mountains and hills are the self-righteous and the high-minded who think that they are the people. They are *it!* But whoever exalts himself must be abased and lowered before the heart is ready to receive salvation.

Crooked ways are the path of dishonest people, who have the reputation of being crooks. Thieves, gamblers, racketeers, bootleggers, and moonshiners belong to this class.

Then there are the rough ways that should be made smooth. We all know fellow sinners whose lives are rough around the edges. They never perfectly met expectations from society, from father or mother, or from mentors and counselors. But that doesn't mean a change cannot be made now.

Many of us Christians have made the U-turn. We have swung the other direction from our sin. But then, much like a roundabout, we have swerved back into the sin. Soon our whole Christian lives are a series of roundabouts, away from sin back into sin, out of temptation back into temptation, avoiding bad company then shirking good company, and around and around we go! That is not allowed on God's royal highway. The goal is not that the Lord has to swerve around the preferred sins of your heart. There is no room for both sin and holy God. Now is the time to prepare the way for the Lord. Now is the time to exit the roundabouts.

Now, it is true that to stop sinning is an impossible task. You will never achieve that goal, and neither will I. We are plagued with incessant, perpetual sin. And it is not through our merits that sin is forgiven. Only through the work of Christ do we seek and find perfection. Yes, to stop sinning is an impossible task. But it is still a noble one. For our text closes by saying, "*And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*" This is the promise that comes with a change of heart, a complete U-turn. There is no exception, no one too proud, too decrepit, too crooked, or too rough. His is the washing; His is the promise.

Consider the kind of heart that God offers to you. Thank goodness that is the Lord Himself who changes hearts and comes with salvation to any and all flesh.

Knowing that the Lord is good and with His power, correct your ways. Stop sinning. Know that the Lord wills your hearts to be changed and turned around. Then the time has come for the appearance of the Savior. When the stones are gathered out, the crooked places straightened, and the rough ones made level and smooth, the King promises His visit; in His name, Amen.