

## **Second Sunday of Advent**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

*December 6, 2009*

### **Malachi 3:1-4 NRSV**

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight — indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

### **Philippians 1:3-11**

In all my prayers for all of you, I always give thanks to my God every time I remember you, praying with joy over your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will carry it all the way forward until the day of Christ Jesus. And it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you have me in your heart, since all of you are my partners in grace, whether in my imprisonment or in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is what I pray: that your love may overflow more and more with the understanding and clear perception you need to discern what really matters, so that you may be pure and uncompromised on the day of Christ, having produced the fruit of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

### **Luke 3:1-6**

In the fifteenth year of Caesar Tiberias' rule — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas — God's word came to Zechariah's son John in the wilderness. And so he went throughout the country around the Jordan, announcing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah's words,

The sound of someone shouting in the wilderness,  
Prepare the Lord's roadway,  
straighten the routes he will use.  
Every valley will be filled up,  
every mountain and hill will be leveled;  
what's crooked will be straightened,  
what's rough will be made a smooth road.  
And everyone living will see God's salvation.

### **Sermon**

State Route 61 starts in Sunbury, passes by our house, then makes its way to Cleveland. About five years ago, road crews "repaired" the section of SR61 that we drive on most often. The edges of the pavement had deteriorated, so the road crews carefully applied extensive patches. No more crumbling asphalt at the edges of the road! But those patches were higher than the adjacent pavement. So whenever it rained, water pooled on the roadway. It was dangerous. People unfamiliar with the road would get pulled this way and that by the puddles. Sometimes they would lose control.

But everything changed a couple of months ago, when new road crews showed up. Big machines chewed off the top layer of asphalt. Then they tore the edges down even deeper. When it came time for new pavement, the edges were made solid first. Then the whole roadway received a dense new topcoat. White and yellow lines followed. And not long after came the rain. This time there were no pools and puddles. The

roadway now has a proper crown, and water rolls off to the sides. And is the highway ever smooth now! What a difference it makes, to tear up a road and built it again.

**And so Luke gives us the words of the prophet Isaiah.**

The sound of someone shouting in the wilderness,  
Prepare the Lord's roadway,  
    straighten the routes he will use.  
Every valley will be filled up,  
    every mountain and hill will be leveled;  
what's crooked will be straightened,  
    what's rough will be made a smooth road.

It's quite a project. Assuming it's "shovel-ready," it will eat up more than a little stimulus money. Existing roadways need renovation. They aren't straight enough and smooth enough for the traffic they will bear. And brand new highways need to be built, from valley up and from mountain down. Except there won't be ups and downs on these roads. In a move to make every environmentalist shudder, the landscape will be completely transformed. Valleys and mountains will disappear. Colorado will be flat from one end to the other.

And down these new and renewed highways will come . . . Are they wide enough, the roads? Are they sturdy enough? Are they level enough? Straight enough? Down these new and renewed highways will come the salvation of the world. It's Isaiah's picture, and it's a good one. The prophet sees Israel's exiles coming home. Not coming down a long, rough, twisting, up and down road. But coming down a wide, smooth, straight, level highway. Coming without delay, without difficulty. Coming home, home at last.

It's the hope, the dream of every exile and of every lost people. To go home. Home, where everything is right and good. Home, where everybody knows your name. Home, where we know how to live, and even know how to die. Home, where we belong. It's Isaiah's picture, his picture for Israel. And Luke claims it, claims it for Israel and for the whole world.

And, Luke says, when John took to the wilderness and when God put his words into John's mouth there, then Isaiah's picture was transformed from a mere hope to a dream come true. Come true not some day. Come true not any old day. But come true this day: "In the fifteenth year of Caesar Tiberias' rule." Come true this day: "When Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene." Come true this day: "During the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." Not a hope, but a dream come true.

**Now, about that road . . .** What is it that undergoes transformation? What is it that undergoes renewal and repair? What is it that undergoes new construction even? Malachi uses a different image than Luke, but the object is clear enough. His image is of purifying fire, fire that's used, step by step, to melt silver ore and remove base elements, a fiery process that's repeated again and again until the necessary purity is obtained.

The purifying process is unavoidable. It's the only way for the people to endure when the Lord's messenger comes. It's the only way. Without purification, no one can stand. Seriously, do you think you could stand in God's presence? Remember the burning bush? God is a consuming fire of holiness, burning away impurity. If God burned away your impurity and my impurity, would there be enough of us left to identify the body?

Now wait a minute! The burning bush was on fire, but it was not burned up. And Malachi says that the Lord's messenger will purify Levi's descendants, the priests, that is – purify them, not to the point of obliterating them, but to the point of renewing them for their service, which is to make offerings for the people of God, so that God will be pleased with all of them.

I know what I wanted Malachi to say. I wanted him to say that, for the exile to be over, for lost people to find their way home, they would have to undergo purification and renewal. That we would have to straighten up and fly right. That we would have to turn our backs on our pride and our anger and our envy and our

laziness and despair and our greed and our swollen appetites and our sexual obsession. That's what I wanted Malachi to say. But he doesn't say that. Instead Malachi talks about the purity of those offering sacrifices to the Lord. And I know that before I turn this text on myself and on you, I first need to see Jesus in it.

If it takes someone pure to make offerings to the Lord – offerings such that the Lord is pleased with his people – then no one is better suited to make those offerings than Jesus, and no offering is more pleasing to God than Jesus offering himself on the cross. So if lost people are to find their way home, if a lost world is ever to make it home again, the journey will be made down the highway Jesus paves through his self-sacrifice. He is the road. He is the way.

**But we're not off the hook.** It's true that Jesus is the highway. Through Jesus, God and his lost children both travel and meet up on the road. Through Jesus, God and a lost world meet up at a broad intersection. God, of course, has the right of way – always – but God welcomes the lost to turn toward him and to share the road with him, the road that leads home. And the good news is, when you're sharing the road with God, you're already as good as home. So, yes, above all Jesus is the way.

But we still have road-work to do. Paul prays for the Christians in Philippi. He prays that they will be transformed: their rough placers smoothed out, their holes filled in, their twists and turns straightened. He prays that Gospel love will transform their perception and priorities and behavior, to make them more like Jesus Christ, so that when he returns, they will be able to stand before him.

No simple task, this renovation. We're not always shovel-ready. But it's a task for us to keep working at – “with fear and trembling,” Paul writes elsewhere in the same letter – because it's serious business, because God intends to remake us, to resurface us, or if necessary to tear us up and build us all over again.

Which brings us to this bit of good news. The project manager is no one other than the Holy Spirit of God. Listen to Paul: “The one who began a good work in you will carry it all the way forward until the day of Christ Jesus.” Yes, we have work to do. Yes, God expects us to devote ourselves to transformation, through prayer and practice and promises and partnership. But we are not in it alone. We are partners with the Holy Spirit – junior partners, but partners nonetheless. And with the Spirit's help, we can commit ourselves to be changed – to be leveled and smoothed and filled in and straightened – so that God can best get to us, so that we can get to God – God who is on the same road, God who is the road – and so that people will see, in us and through us, the salvation of God.

And believe me, people notice when a bumpy road gets paved.