

Advent 2B, 2008

Text: Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11

Title: Jesus does construction

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No one likes construction. It slows you down. It makes you late. It raises your blood pressure. There's usually merging involved, and people will wait until the last possible minute to merge and then force their way in front of you. Construction is loud and smelly, and an overall pain in the neck. But construction is necessary. We complain about the potholes and congestion. We want roads that are smooth and wide and well-maintained. But we all hate construction.

Our gospel lesson today is a proposal for a massive construction project. Construction like the world has never seen. This is John the Baptist's message: "Prepare the Lord's road, make straight His paths." Get the road ready.

The Lord Himself, God almighty, the creator of heaven and earth is about to appear on the scene. He's coming this Advent. But His road is not yet ready. Massive construction is still needed. The Lord's road has become overgrown with weeds. The Lord's road is full of potholes. It's rough and rocky. It's neither straight nor level. Here is what needs to be done:

Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

We need a massive construction project because the Lord is coming and His road is not ready. There is no quick fix. We can't just fill in a few potholes with asphalt. We can't just patch a few cracks. Entire valleys need to be filled in. Mountains need to be torn down. The ground must be leveled for a proper road.

There are always preparations that need to be made for special people and special events. If Chicago gets the 2016 Olympics, major work will be done to get this town ready. We can expect visitors and athletes to come from all over the world. There will also be visiting dignitaries, presidents, prime ministers, even kings and queens. So you can be sure that there will be plenty of construction- new stadiums and venues, and of course, road construction.

Imagine if the Lord of heaven and earth were to come here for a royal visit. What sort of preparations would be needed to get this place cleaned up and in shape for His visit? It's not a matter of force or compulsion, but something we would do willingly and freely. We want to express our love and admiration for Him, so we would do everything we could to make His visit a pleasant one.

We're nearing Christmas, and many of you will be entertaining guests over the holidays. If not this year, you've probably done so in years past. Think of all the preparations that need to be made when someone you love comes for a visit. The house needs to be cleaned, the guest room needs to be prepared, and you might need to check the fridge and the pantry to be sure that you have enough food, just for starters. And you do these things, not because you have to, but because you want to. You want to make sure that your guests enjoy their time with you. You only want the best for them.

Now imagine if you have guests coming into town for a visit, and you do nothing to prepare. You don't even look in the guest room, but you assume that it must still be clean from the last time you have people over. And you don't take stock of your food, because, well, the last time you looked there was plenty, and so everything should be fine. But in reality, everything is not fine. The guest room needs to be cleaned, there's no fresh linens, and the last guests left everything in a mess. And the cupboard is bare, too, not a scrap of food in the house.

If your loved ones showed up and found your house in such a state, you would be embarrassed, you would feel bad, and you would end up apologizing over and over again for not being prepared.

You don't want this to happen. What you need is for someone to tell you that your house is a mess, your cupboard is bare and that it's time to get to work. Not because they are mean and nasty, but because you need to be ready for your guests. This is what you need to hear. It's better for you to hear the truth than to be caught unprepared. It's better for you to hear the truth than to be caught unprepared. You need someone to tell you that there's a problem.

That person is John. John the Baptist. His message is "Prepare." "Get ready." Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time to get ready for Jesus' coming. And I don't mean putting up Christmas decorations. And I don't mean baking Christmas cookies. And I don't mean listening to Christmas music on the radio, and shopping for presents.

Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time to clean house. It's time to take stock. It's time to fix the roads. Because Jesus is coming. The King is coming, and we're not ready.

John tells us how this is done. John's job is to prepare us for Jesus' coming. "Repent" is what John says. It's not a popular message. These words shine God's Law into the cobwebs in the corners of our rooms. They show every speck of dust on the furniture. They are the inspector who tells us that our road is not up to code. These words echo in our empty cupboards and we realize that we're not ready.

John's words open our eyes and we realize that we're not prepared. Jesus is coming and we're not ready. If He were to come today none of us would be ready. Our lives are a mess. We heard in the epistle that we are to live holy and godly lives, to be spotless and blameless. But we know that's not the case. Everything we do is tainted by sin and selfishness. Our lives are dirty and polluted by our evil thoughts, words, and deeds. All of that means that we're not ready. When you realize that you're not ready, when you find out that you're not prepared for something important, it can be devastating.

My second year at the seminary I took a required class in World Religions. There was nothing too remarkable about the class. I had had the professor before. I knew the basics of most of the religions we covered. I was just breezing through the class without paying too much attention. Then it came to end of the quarter it was the week before finals. I was finishing up papers and projects and starting to think about studying for final exams. I came to my World Religions class expecting to wrap everything up and review a bit for the final. As it turns out, the professor had scheduled the final a week early because he was going out of town. I hadn't been paying close attention to the class schedule, and so the final exam caught me by surprise.

I wasn't ready, and when I realized that I had to take the exam, panic set in. I knew I could possibly fail the class. I might have to retake the entire class again. I thought about making an excuse, faking an illness, or just making a run for the door. But in the end, I realized that there was nothing I could do except take the test. I didn't do well. It was clearly my fault. If someone in my class had reminded me, I could have studied and been more prepared.

John the Baptist came to prepare the people for Jesus. His message was harsh. Repent. Bare fruit. The Lord is coming, and if you're not ready you're in trouble. In our epistle we heard that the Lord will come like a thief in the night. There will be no warning. The Lord will show up at your door and you will either be ready or you won't. The final exam will be handed out, and you will either be prepared, or you won't.

That's not a message we like to hear. We'd rather hear something like, "Don't worry, relax. Jesus is coming, but you've got plenty of time. Everything's fine. Jesus doesn't mind a little dust or dirt. Jesus doesn't need a fancy road. Don't wear yourself out getting ready. Take it easy."

But that message is a lie. Jesus is coming and we're not ready. We begin every Sunday by confessing that we're not ready. We say, "I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess to you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you." And then again, "Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy." And again, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." And finally, "O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."

It's clear that we're not ready, we're unprepared. The Law shows us our sin. But God's Spirit makes us ready. The gospel cleans us, straightens us out, fills in the holes, by joining us with Christ. The Lord Himself does construction on you. To our confession, the Lord responds, I forgive you all your sins. The Lord has mercy on us. The Lord renews a right spirit within us. The Lamb of God takes away our sin by giving us His body and blood. This is where the Lord prepares you for His coming, as He hears your prayers, your pleas, and your confession, and does what you are unable to do for yourself.

John says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. You have been baptized by Jesus Christ. The flood of your baptism has broken down the hills and mountains in your life. The flood of your baptism has filled in every valley. It has washed you clean and made you ready to meet Jesus Christ.

The truth is that you are ready. You are prepared. The Lord has made you ready. He has done major construction on your heart. But your heart needs regular maintenance. And so that's why you're here week after week. The Lord tears you down with His Law and builds you back up again with His gospel. He makes your heart a straight, level, road, so that He will come with His gifts of love and mercy.

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

And He does.

Amen.