

Luke 3:1-6

A sign that few of us enjoy seeing while driving is one that warns us of “Road Work Ahead.” We put up with it because we know that repairing and maintaining highways is necessary. But we would just as soon enjoy the finished product without having to endure the construction process. I think the same thing is true with the season of Advent in the Church. We put up with it because we can’t speed up the process of time. But we would just as soon move ahead to the Baby Jesus and forget about John the Baptist. We want the “finished product,” and we don’t really like the delay. We like trees and presents and singing carols much more than we like hearing about repentance and the lighting of candles on an Advent wreath.

But here we are in the construction zone. We’re in the middle of Advent. The highway is not yet finished. We move slowly through this time of repentance in the Church all the while hearing the cry: “Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for Him!”

The difference between the roads around us and the highway spoken of by the prophet is that, while both are constantly under construction, the roads around us we travel on, but the road of Advent is traveled by the Lord.

For you and me to travel on the highways, they need to be prepared. Ten days ago few people were traveling. The ice and snow kept most people at home. It was good to hear and see the salt trucks out clearing the roads, and yet how disgusted we become when we get stuck behind one on the highway.

We feel the same way about those who preach repentance. We like to hear them out there clearing away the sins of society. It bothers us, however, when they get too close to us. When God’s preachers get in our way and force us to change the way we’re traveling through life, we mutter and grumble to ourselves and to others.

John the Baptist is one of those “salt trucks,” and he’s planted himself right smack in the middle of the road we’re on. When he cries, “Repent!”...he’s not talking to someone out there; he’s talking to you, and to me. If Jesus is going to travel the road into our heart, that road needs to be cleared—because right now it’s a mess. If we think that everything is just fine with our life, then we’re not looking at the road to our heart. We’ve blocked the path with our sinful pride. Whenever we talk about the sins of others we compare ourselves to them, and what develops is a mountain of pride sitting up high on the road to our heart.

How can Jesus come to a person who thinks he’s doing fine without Him? If I’m proud of who I am, then I’m not a “beggar” before God. If I’m always looking at the good things I’m doing, then I’m not looking at what Jesus did for me. If Jesus is going to travel to Augusta, Defiance, Marthasville, and Washington, then we need to clear away the mountains of sinful pride from before our hearts—because right now we’re blocking His way. We’re not seeing ourselves the way He sees us—as beggars who have nothing to offer. We see what poor condition our neighbor’s road is in, but with our sinful pride blocking our view, we fail to see that our road—our heart and life—is just as bad. We need to have that mountain of pride cleared away.

But when we do that, let's be careful not to dig a hole in the road. When salt trucks clear the highways they sometimes cut into weak places in the road. The danger for us is that in removing the mountains of pride we tear up the road altogether by despairing that we're so sinful that Jesus would never want to come to our heart. The pits and holes in our road are as bad as the mountains. If I think that my road is not worth repairing because God would never forgive someone like me, then I do not understand the mercy of God, nor am I seeing myself as He sees me—a beggar who is the object of His love.

God is merciful not because you repent, but because He is merciful. God does not desire to come to your heart because of who and what you are, but because He loves who and what you are. God is not merciful because you repent; you repent because He is merciful. Repentance is His work within us. It's His prophet, His message, His road crew, His salt trucks.

You may have noticed that the doors to my house are blocked with ice, and I feel badly about that, but I am helpless to do anything about it. That ice is sitting in places where the sun never shines. Unless and until the warm rays of the sun melt the ice before my doors, those paths are not easy to travel on.

And that is also true with the door to my heart. I have blocked it with my sinful pride. I have torn it up with my doubts and unbelief. My heart is as cold as ice, and unless the rays of the Son of God melt my heart and clear the way, I will not know the warmth of His love.

But that's exactly what He does! Our Introit for today begins: "Restore us, O God; Make Your face shine upon us that we may be saved." We can't clear the path to our heart, but God does. We can't remove the ice and snow, but God does. What melts ice? The sunshine. Jesus is the Light of the world, and His face is shining on you right now. You don't have to change for God to love you. He loves you right now, and it is His love that changes us; that clears away those mountains; that fills up those potholes; and that removes the ice around our heart.

When Jesus was on the cross, it became totally dark for three hours. The sun did not shine. But with His resurrection, the light of His love burst forth upon the whole world. We don't live in the darkness of death anymore—we live in the light of His love.

You may be the proudest person on earth, but that doesn't change the fact that He loves you and He forgives you. You may believe that there are things you have done in your life which are beyond the reach of His mercy; that the rays of His love cannot reach those secret sins hidden deep down in your heart. But friend, He died for those sins. He already reached them on Calvary's cross. In Baptism He declares you clean of all sin, not just the sins others can see, but also those sins which are hidden away.

You may have a cold heart...the coldest, but that does not change what Jesus did for you. His heart beat for you when He lived on this earth. His heart died for you on the cross. And He now, through the Sacrament of His body and blood, gives His heart to you. There may be places where the sun cannot reach, but that's because it remains up high in the sky. But Jesus, the Son of God, comes to where you are—and right here and now through His Word and Sacrament, He forgives you, He restores you, He saves you.

Do you know that there is one road, one path, one door, which is not blocked, and it never will be? It's the path to heaven, because Jesus is that Path. He is the Way, the Road, the Door. And no sin of yours and no sin of mine can ever block that door. It will never ice over and freeze up. It will never be covered over with a blizzard of our sins. That door is open for you right here and now. It does not depend upon what you do. It depends on what Jesus did and does for you. He lived, He died, and He rose for you. He baptized you. And He is here today for you, to forgive you—and He does forgive you—and to give you His salvation. Amen.