

The Second Sunday of Advent

6 December 2009

Luke 3:1-6

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SURVIVING ROAD CONSTRUCTION AND OTHER DELAYS

I have to admit that road construction can really get to me. I know that the roads need repairing. I'm thankful for the stimulus package money that went to repair and improve a lot of roads that I drive on like Addison and Sheridan Road in Evanston. It's just from March through November it seems everywhere you go there are more orange cones, more barricades and more road construction. You try to avoid one route that has construction and you find delays on a different one. If it's not fixing potholes and paving, it's sewer work. When several red lights turn green and red again, and I'm still in line waiting to get through, I feel my stress level rising. And it's then I wish I had a meditation bell in my car that I could ring. The sonorous sound would remind me to breathe, to relax, to chill.

Now I know you urbanites that don't own a car are feeling pretty good right now. You don't have to deal with gridlock and road rage and parallel parking. But riding the el brings construction delays, crowded cars, waiting in the cold, and plenty of other things to make you lose your patience.

I doubt that John the Baptist was thinking of such things when he cried out these words: *Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.* They're words from the prophet Isaiah who also includes this phrase: in the desert prepare a highway for our God.

Prepare the way of the Lord is a classic Advent phrase. But contemporize "way" and you get highway, boulevard, pathway, expressway, thruway, track, trail, turnpike, viaduct. Or simply: road.

John is preparing the way for God's promised Messiah. Did you catch all those names at the beginning of the gospel: Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanius, Annas and Caiaphas? This is not simply to give the historical context for John's preaching. These are the ones who will oppose the Christ that John foretells. The coming One will unsettle the political, economic and religious powers. His very appearing will threaten those who hang on to the status quo. The powers that be. The way things have always been.

Where is this road taking us? Where will this Christ lead us? What is the destination?

For the gospel writer Luke, the Advent of Jesus is a major road construction project. Mountains and hills will be leveled. The rough places made smooth. Or as Mary proclaims: the lowly will be raised up, the mighty cast down, and rich sent away empty. God's gift of salvation, healing, shalom, is for all people of the earth.

During Advent it seems like the road is taking us to Christmas. For some, the path of Jesus is all about getting to heaven. Yet others say that it's not just the destination that's important, but the journey itself. It reminds me of the Willie Nelson song, "On the road again, just can't wait to get on the road again. Goin' places I've never been. Seein' things I may never see again."

You could say that in baptism we are called to join in the divine road construction project of leveling and making the rough places smooth. To prepare the way for Christ's coming into our lives and into the world. Yet there are always delays. Christ has come and yet our world is still filled with violence, poverty and oppression. Christ has come and yet our hearts are still wintry with grief, worry or loneliness. No wonder the path we prepare for the Lord can seem pretty rough and bumpy at times.

The U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration has put out some tips for staying safe in work zones. Or in other words: how to survive road construction and other delays. Several of them sound like good spiritual advice for us as we practice our Advent waiting and preparation:

- * Stay alert and pay attention to the roadway, signs and work zone flaggers.
- * Don't tailgate or speed, and always slow to the posted limits.
- * Minimize distractions such as cell phones and onboard navigation systems.
- * Be prepared. Carry a roadside emergency and first aid kit.
- * Be patient and stay calm.

I've learned that it takes a lot of time and energy to get places in the city. If you don't want to be late, you must always allow time for delays, for traffic, for the unexpected. A couple weeks ago I had a flat tire on Lake Shore Drive. To my great surprise, I was able to put on the spare and get to the Just Tires shop. I missed my meeting, but the whole experience reminded me that I needed to take a breath, slow down, keep things in perspective. Sometimes I move too fast and miss the gifts in the moment.

Many times I wish that I knew where the road is taking us. Where the path will lead. What the actual destination is. Like many of you, I'd like to know the future. I'd like to know specifically how to prepare. Some members of our congregation have lost jobs and others are facing other uncertainties. And in many ways, we need to plan and be ready for whatever is coming next.

And yet the road often takes us to places we would have never expected. The first coming of Jesus was like that. He was not all what people expected. And should we be surprised that he continues to come into our lives and into the world, that things will never be the same again. That there will be a lot of road construction. Delays. Situations that test our patience.

Yet it is into such a world that Christ comes. On this very day, John the Baptist announces the good news: *Prepare the royal highway, the King of kings is near! Let every hill and valley a level road appear! Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's word.*

In this holy assembly on this Advent Sunday, the road brings us once again to the Word of God among us. And the table of grace spread before us. God's awesome stimulus package, God's wonderful road construction project takes a lot of energy and a lot of hope. So take a deep breath. Stay alert. Be prepared. Minimize distractions. Slow to the posted limits. Be patient and stay calm.

And with great Advent joy, watch for the signs along the road. Signs of Christ's coming.