

“Road to Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent II – December 9, 2012

Luke 3: 1-6

I know I’ve shared this before, but I love watching things get built, especially roads. I think it is fascinating to drive through a construction zone and see how a street, road, or highway is transformed. I may be one of the few folks who actually enjoys driving through road construction!

As a result, it’s been a dream-come-true for me the last four years coming to work each day. We have witnessed incredible changes along I-465 on the west side of Indianapolis, changing what had been the oldest section of the interstate loop into the newest. This stretch of road was not only crumbling, but it was rather unsafe, especially if you were trying to merge on or off on the short clover-leaf intersections. It has been a pain, to be sure, as we have had to endure many delays and detours. But the end result is a safer stretch of highway which handles more traffic than ever before.

I’ve been particularly intrigued by the changes to the intersection with Crawfordsville Road and I-74. I’m sure for those of you who have lived here much longer than me, it’s been quite a stark change to get used to. The reorientation of High School Road and Crawfordsville, changing the entrance to I-465, and replacing the cloverleaves with these high, flyover bridges. It’s been incredible to see the amount of dirt which has been moved to build this new intersection, and the machines which have done the moving! But it has resulted in a more straightforward intersection, which will prove safer in the long-run.

We are blessed in this country with good, safe roads, which allow for the swift movement of people and commerce. If you have ever been in another country which does not have such a good road network, then you know how much we appreciate what we have here. My experience with that fact came when I visited India two years ago. It was incredible to me to see how few modern highways there were, and how long it took us to drive certain distances. The roads were curvy, full of bumps, and many times we had to pull off to the side to let oncoming traffic by, since the roads were narrow. It was both amazing and frustrating to experience, since I was used to roads which were smoother and straighter and easier to traverse.

As we traverse our roads to Bethlehem this Advent Season, we hear the prophet crying out in the wilderness:

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth (Luke 3:5).

Why do we have to hear John the Baptist preach before we can welcome the Christ child on Christmas? There is a popular saying that you can’t get to Easter Sunday without going through Good Friday. To parallel that phrase, why can’t we get to Christmas Day without going through the wilderness and John the Baptist?

Maybe it had something to do with helping us to make our paths straight and smooth out our rough places. Advent is about getting our whole selves ready: body, mind, heart, and soul. And in John we hear the vision which the prophet Isaiah spoke of: "Prepare the way of the Lord – make his paths straight." John is God's messenger to the people, and to us, that the one who is being sent is like no other, and will require much of any who wish to follow.

Kathy Beach-Verhey writes: *Advent is a season of preparation. At home people are cleaning, getting out their Christmas decorations, purchasing a tree, baking, hosting and attending parties, and simply getting ready for Christmas. But into our Advent "busy-ness" each year enters John the Baptist. He interrupts our schedules and demands that preparations of a different kind be made. John demands that we get ready for Jesus. In the style of Old Testament prophets before him, John challenges Advent people with a message of personal and corporate self-examination. Advent, John reminds us, is a time to prepare to welcome Jesus and not simply our invited Christmas houseguests.*

John's challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (metanoia in Greek) means literally, to change one's mind, turn around, reorient oneself. John calls all people to turn to God and from sin, to seek God's forgiveness, and to prepare the way of the Lord. God sent the message to John, not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, but out in the wilderness. Not the seat of political or religious power, but the wilderness, the often scary and confusing place where God had spoken to God's people in the past and through which God had led God's people to a new and promised life. Our repentance, our turning around, will likely involve us looking at the structures and the systems and the people of the world around us in new and different ways (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 47-49).

The word "repent" has many negative connotations today. Perhaps that is the result of Bible-thumping, fundamentalist religion. In the context of today's passage, however, it is important to reclaim the theological meaning of this crucial biblical word: to turn away from sin, to turn toward God, and to reorient our lives with God at our center.

This invitation to repent is not about legalism; at its core, repentance is about forgiveness and grace. John Calvin exhorted the church to hear the gospel in John the Baptist's call to repentance, rather than the law. In Calvin's words: "For John does not say, 'Repent ye, and in this way *the kingdom of heaven* will afterwards be *at hand*;' but first brings forward the grace of God, and then exhorts (all) to *repent*. Hence it is evident, that the foundation of repentance is the mercy of God, by which he restores the lost" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists (1558), vol. 1, on Matthew 3:1-6*).

Where is grace in repentance? It is finding the forgiveness only God can give. The word translated "forgiveness" comes from a word in Greek which means "to let go." When we turn toward God, we are turning toward the only one who has the authority and power to let go of our sins, our pain, our burdens. When we receive forgiveness, the one whom we have hurt has let go of the pain we caused him or her. When we forgive another, we are willing to let go of the past pain, and live into a new light together. This is what God has done in Jesus Christ for us. This is one way we are called to prepare earnestly and faithfully this Advent for God's Son.

How straight or crooked are our roads? How smooth or rough are our paths? What makes our roads uneven and crooked? Fear? Sin? Guilt? Brokenness? Do we believe our journey will get easier by holding onto everything from our past? Or do we believe that to travel the road to grace, we must be willing to let go of our past, and turn our lives over to God?

One of my favorite movies is “Glory Road.” It is the story of the 1965-66 Texas Western College men’s basketball team. That team was coached by Don Haskins, who made the decision to recruit and play African-American student-athletes at a school in the Deep South. It was Haskins’ first college coaching job, and he took a great risk in this approach, since the culture was not very accepting. But he wanted to play the best players, and give them the best opportunity for an education and success.

The movie follows the Texas Western Miners through the 1965-66 season, in which they won all but one of their regular season games. The team was composed of 7 black players and 5 white players, and the movie depicts the struggles they have socially and culturally in bonding as a team. It is powerful and raw, the emotions which are expressed throughout the film, especially when the team is the target of racial slurs and epithets. And yet, just when you think this team will splinter apart, through the leadership of Haskins, they unite against this hatred with toughness, commitment, and perseverance.

The movie concludes with the Miners in the national championship game – against the University of Kentucky, coached by Adolph Rupp, who did not recruit a black student-athlete until 1969. Haskins decided the night before the game to play only the seven black players. According to Haskins, that decision was motivated by what gave his team the best chance to win the game, as they were his best players. But it also sent an indelible message to his team, to Kentucky, and to the world: the days of segregated major college athletics was over, and a new road was to be travelled. The final score that night was Texas Western 72, Kentucky 65. Forty-one years later, that entire team – black and white players together – was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, with Coach Don Haskins having been inducted ten years earlier.

The roads we travel in life include many key choices. “Glory Road” is a story of individuals making incredible choices in the face of adversity, with the result of those choices being change, justice, integrity, and respect.

John the Baptist calls for us to travel a road to grace this Advent Season. It is a road filled with choices we must make. Which way will we turn: away from God, or toward God? As we seek to reorient ourselves toward God, may we receive the gift of grace and forgiveness our God gives us, “so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.