

Second Advent, December 6, 2009
St. Barnabas, Florissant
The Rev. Dr. Warren E. Crews

PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

In the 15 year of the rule of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee and when Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. Luke, ever the historian, is following the Old Testament formula for announcing the appointment of a new prophet. He wants us to know that in 28 A.D. a prophet we call John the Baptizer appeared in the Jordan River preaching fire and brimstone, calling the Jewish people to a repentance for the forgiveness of sins and to undergo a ritual baptism in the river to signify their change of heart and their acceptance of God's forgiveness.

Since this is only the first of a two- week sequence of gospel lessons on John the Baptist, I want to focus our attention on John's use of the earlier words of the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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..." Isaiah's words were directed to the Jews living in exile in Babylon, separated from their home in Jerusalem by a vast expanse of desert. Isaiah played with the image of a great new, superhighway running through the desert, straight as an arrow and as level as a carpenter's plane.

That highway never materialized physically. The exiled Jews had to get back home, eventually, the old fashioned way: on camels going the long way around the desert. John the Baptist, of course, was not speaking to Jews in exile, separated from home by a desert. But, he was addressing a people who were suffering from foreign occupation and who were becoming more and more unsure that God's promises of a messianic age would come to pass. John's stirring words were intended to revive that vision.

These words about a great new superhighway have always meant a lot to me because of childhood memories. In the 1950s President Eisenhower launched the construction of a new interstate highway system. One of the early legs of that system was to be a new highway between my hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma and the state capital, Oklahoma City. I was born in a small town about 25 miles north of Oklahoma City, but we had moved to Tulsa when I was six. The old state highway between the two cities was two-laner, which slowly and dangerously wound its way through the hill country of central Oklahoma. It took three hours to go less than 90 miles. My father's company supplied all of the heavy equipment that was used to build the Turner Turnpike, which is part of Interstate 44. He took me to watch the great earthmovers leveling off the hills and filling up the valleys. And it was indeed straight as an arrow. When it was finished the travelling time was cut in half. Old ways of travelling faded away and new ways were born. Life in central Oklahoma was never the same again.

John the Baptist obviously was not referring literally to the building of a new highway. It is clear that he is speaking metaphorically. The new highway is a moral and spiritual one. The hills and valleys and crooked roads were all of the moral and spiritual obstacles that separate us from God. Repenting of one's sins and returning one's focus to God and God's promises is what will prepare the way—the royal highway—for the messianic age to come to Israel. I won't say anymore about because that is the theme for next week—John's pointing to Jesus as the messiah.

I want to try something that requires using our imagination. Let's imagine that God is about to appoint a new prophet for this place in the person of your new rector. Your parish records would read something like this: In the first year of the presidency of Barack Obama and of the governorship of Jay Nixon, and in the ninth year of the mayoralty of Robert G. Lowery, Sr. of Florissant and in the eighth year of the episcopacy of George Wayne Smith the word of God came to the new rector of St. Barnabas. He or she spoke to the people saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." So, my friends, using our imaginations, what would that mean to you? What are the hills and valleys in this place? What crooked places need straightening out? What preparations do you need to make so that life under your new rector will be different from the past? And, I suppose, even a prior question is: is this new straight path to God something you want? What is your vision of what this place could look like if God's Spirit was released in the coming of your new priest? I cannot answer these questions for you. I am sure that they are ones that your search committee has been wrestling with low these many months. But, living in a parish that has just gotten a new priest I am very clear that we are going to have to change many things if his leadership is going to be spiritually effective. We didn't do much preparing for all of that and now must do the hard work. You have spent two years now and hopefully are much more aware of the changes that will need to be made for new life to emerge. I know that you long for new surge of members and resources, but that can come only if there is a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit in this place.

All of such talk about change—about leveling and straightening—sounds heavy and difficult. It is easy to wonder whether you—any parish for that matter—is up to such change. It is easy to say, "We are so small and the challenges are so great—how can we build such a new highway?"

I am in a lectionary study group with a pastor who once was a professor of Hebrew and Greek. He said something about this passage from John the Baptist (quoting Isaiah): the Hebrew and Greek are not talking about the Jews, or us for that matter, building the highway on our own. Only God can build it. But, God will not do that without our cooperation. We have to be ready to let go and let God lead us in the construction efforts. Yes, we are too small for such a great work, but with God all things are possible—if we prepare ourselves to receive the infusion of God's Spirit into our hearts and minds, acting together as a congregation. The new rector cannot do this by his- or herself. His or her arrival will merely give you the opportunity to

cooperate with God in building such a great new way of life here at St. Barnabas.

I want to finish with one of the closing sentences from Morning and Evening Prayer that seems very appropriate for your situation: "Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. *Amen.*"