

***<sup>1</sup> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:***

***“A voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.***

***<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in,  
every mountain and hill made low.  
The crooked roads shall become straight,  
the rough ways smooth.***

***<sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ”*** (NIV84)

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## **LEVEL THE PATH FOR THE LORD**

It seems like a never ending job. The city and state both want the roads to be as clear and level as they can for you to drive on. That’s why they spend enormous amounts of money to keep the roads nice. Did you know that the city of Anchorage spends \$10 million in an average winter to clear the snow off the roads? And that’s an average year. In the 2011-2012 winter, they had spent \$11 million by the 12<sup>th</sup> of January. And that’s just pushing the snow to the side. We haven’t addressed fixing the potholes or the ruts that the snow tires make. We haven’t talked about fixing bridges or building new roads. The price tags on projects like that might make you dizzy. But it’s important. It’s important to have clear and level roads for us to drive on. It keeps us safe and keeps the economy chugging along.

Keeping the roads clear and level is a challenge that any government faces. And an Arctic government has a double challenge. In a place that gets a lot of snow, a place that experiences freezing and thawing several times during a season, potholes, frost heaves and snow tire ruts are a fact of life. And paying to repair the damage is a fact of governing in a place like Alaska.

Keeping a level path is most certainly a challenge and it’s a challenge that our gospel writer Luke addresses today. Our Advent lesson from God’s Word addresses the challenge of keeping a level path in our hearts. Today with God’s help and motivated by his love, let’s strive to **Level the Path for the Lord.**

Our text this morning starts with a long list of political rulers who were in power at the time that our text took place. But there are more important things about this list than memorizing who ruled where. Which Ceasar was in Rome and which of the Herods held the power might make for an interesting History Channel special, but as far as the devotional aspect of this text they mean very little. Perhaps this is why they are included. Not so much that we recognize who they are or what they are saying. Maybe in this case, what they are not saying is more important. The important voice that is coming doesn’t come from one of their palaces. The voice which would make a difference came from someplace else. Not from Rome or Damascus, or Jerusalem. The voice didn’t come from a capital city – in fact it didn’t come from a city at all – it came from the wilderness around the Jordan River.

## Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist was the voice who would call out from the desert. He was the one who would announce the coming of greatness and power. He would introduce a King of greater significance than Herod or Caesar. He would announce the coming of our Messiah King!!

Luke tells us the reason that John's was the voice to be heard. It's because he was called by God to speak. ***The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.*** God called John to be his prophet. This formula is the one that is used in almost all of the books written by the Old Testament prophets. They always share with us that God's words came to them and with them came a call to speak. John was called to be God's prophet and to speak to the people about the Savior.

In our Old Testament lesson – Malachi prophesied about John the Baptist, calling him the messenger who would come. Isaiah foretold his coming as well, and Luke reminds us of his prophecy as he records for us the words that Isaiah wrote concerning 800 years before. Isaiah tells of what John's job was and what he was to preach. ***Prepare the way for the Lord.***

The next few verses are ways that we can do that. Isaiah goes on to tell us what needs to be done for the coming of the King. He says, ***make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.***

These things that Isaiah brings us are things that we done literally when kings came to visit foreign lands. Crews would work overtime preparing the way for the arrival of royalty. They would clear the roads and level the paths. If it was an important visit from a powerful king, they might even blast out some mountains and fill in some valleys, so that the king's chariots wouldn't have to go up and down the hills. They would take out unnecessary curves in the road and smooth out the bumps. They would do their best to level the paths, and they'd definitely fill in the potholes. They would do whatever they could to make sure their land looked better and more presentable for the king.

It makes me think of when President Obama visited Alaska this past September. Weeks in advance of his visit to Kotzebue, the crews were out cleaning up. The trash on the beaches and roadways didn't really bother them all that much, but when the President is coming, it's time to clean up.

Is the same true in our lives? We are OK with the clutter in our homes. We might even grow accustomed to it or even fond of it. You probably have some close friends that if they come over, you wouldn't even bother cleaning up. They are like family and they know you, there's no point in keep up appearances with them. But when someone new, someone special is coming up, we want to make a good first impression, so we clean up, or at least put the clutter in a box and hide the box.

So what Luke and Isaiah aren't telling us that we need to go into road construction! They are telling us that we need to go into heart construction. He wants us to fix our hearts before the King arrives. He wants us to prepare our hearts to see him for who he is in the manger. He wants our hearts to be ready and waiting for him when he returns.

## Luke 3:1-6

And it's a warning that we need to hear! Our hearts are filled with spiritual garbage, and don't we often think that it's not a big deal! We grow accustomed to it. We might even grow fond of the garbage in our hearts. We get so used to the sin in our hearts that we don't feel guilty about it anymore. That apathy shines forth in the words that we use about others, the attitudes that we put on display for others to see and hear. Pride and greed and anger fuel our very being. Selfish interests become what drive us and earthly gain is what gives us confidence and hope. We allow priorities to slip as we find how many times the important things of God get shoved to the side or at times even out of the picture entirely. We find too often that we are living for meaningless things and our relationship with Jesus suffers.

Or maybe we think we can hide our garbage. We feel like we can box it up and throw it in the corner. We can go through the motions in worship and then go right back to it when we are looking for entertainment again. We think we can appease God, while clinging to some of the sin that gratifies the sinful nature. But that's not what God wants and it's not what he says. He calls for a drastic step. Get out the bulldozer, get rid of the sin. The King is coming, have your heart clean.

And perhaps you're seeing a problem. We can't prepare our hearts for Jesus. We can't avoid the potholes of sin or the valleys of temptation. We can't really fix the problem in our hearts, because on our own we cling to sin. We are powerless to let it go, powerless to change our lives. Powerless to avoid the hell that we most certainly deserve.

I'm sure you can sympathize with last minute cleaning. The final push toward getting the house clean as the clock races toward the time that company is coming. If you are like me you've made guests wait at the door while you quickly put the vacuum away. Sometimes it's a challenge to have the cleanup chores done on time.

Wouldn't it be awesome to have guests that would clean for you? What if you were inviting some friends over for Friday night dinner and they said, we'd love to, but we are also going to come on Wednesday and Thursday night to help clean – better than that – to clean for you so that you don't have to worry about it. Dinner guests and a maid service all in one!! Score, right!!

That's Jesus. He knows that we can't properly clean-up for his arrival, so he does it for us. He uses his Word of promise to cleanse our hearts. He uses his powerful gospel to blast away at the stubborn sin that clings to our hearts. He came to earth to be our substitute, to obey where we disobey, to be strong where we are weak. He took on our punishment and even our death so that we could have life in his name. He comes in bread and wine to get us ready for his final return – forgiving us through the life giving power of Holy Communion and building us up in love for him and for one another.

The quote from Isaiah ends with a fitting line. He says, ***And all mankind will see God's salvation.*** We see God's salvation as our Jesus is placed in the manger. We see his salvation as we recognize his perfect obedience to the law. We see God's salvation as our Savior enters the courtroom in our place. We see God's salvation as his Son dies as our substitute. We see the pains that our sins caused, yet we need not be sorrowful – because it is love that we see on the cross. It is grace that we see as Jesus dies in our place. We see his love and glory as our salvation is worked out in the doing and dying of Jesus. And we see the plan completed as Jesus rises in glory on Easter morn. What Isaiah only

## Luke 3:1-6

saw through the eyes of prophecy, we see through the pages of God's Word. What Isaiah only knew as promise, we see as fulfillment in Jesus.

In Jesus the work is done, and at his return it becomes ours. We long for Christ's second coming the way Isaiah longed for his first. We have the promise of his return. We have the assurance that the day of Judgment is a day of joy for those who believe in him. We see a promise, but by faith we see fulfillment in the return of Christ. When he comes, then ***all mankind will see God's salvation.***

I hope you recognize your role in that last line from Isaiah. Isaiah announced the coming Savior. John the Baptist announced his coming as well. And today you and I are called on to announce his coming in love. We are the voice calling those in our lives to recognize his love. We are the ones urging others to repent of their sins, to turn from their unbelief, and to see God's salvation through Jesus. God equips us for that task.

Even though our sin puts bumps and potholes, high points and low points on our path, our God sees them all and keep us safe. He urges us to **Level the Path for the Lord** but he doesn't expect us to do it on our own. He urges us through his Word, he equips us through the means of grace. He empowers us through the forgiveness of sins that we might be prepared for his coming in glory.

God bless you this Advent season as you seek to **Level the Path for the Lord**. Amen.