

Sermon on **Luke 3:1-6** for Second Sunday of Advent
St. Paul's Lutheran – New Ulm, MN – Pastor N. Scharf

I remember the day they took away the *Willkommen* sign on Hwy 37. The trucks were there with the equipment to move a sign that they just put up. I did not understand. Is New Ulm abandoning its German heritage? Was it poor planning, or in danger of the river? I didn't know. And then I found out they were moving it further down 37. I was more puzzled. Then I was informed that Hwy 14 was expanding, a much-needed safety improvement, and the sign was moved in preparation. About time! Too many lives have been lost on Hwy 14. The road needs to be fixed, widened, and improved to make it safer. Confusion turned to thankfulness.

I was told we only have two seasons in the Midwest – Winter and Road Construction. Today God's Word shows us that we are legitimately in:

**Advent: The Season of Spiritual Road Construction.
God fixes the road of your heart for the Savior's arrival.**

Luke 3:1-6 - 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 – during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, 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. And all people will see God's salvation.'"

Luke, the Gospel writer, told Theophilus that he "*decided to write an orderly account...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*" Luke details for us the setting in which John, the Elijah who was to come, was called by God to his ministry preparing the way for the Messiah. From the global rule to the local rule to the religious leaders Luke pinpoints the factual and historical fulfillment of God's promised **spiritual construction worker**, John.

"The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." God kept his promise to all Israel, and to the priest Zechariah. Zechariah was told, "*He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord"* (1:16-18). The final blueprint had been laid out on God's drafting table. God placed a hard hat on Zechariah's son John and sent him out to follow God's blueprint for the **spiritual road construction of human hearts, yours included.**

Like a starting gun *the word of God came to John, "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."* You see the fences go up. The flatbed trailers are unloaded, and construction equipment appears. The machines and tools for the work are all set out, and then the day comes when the work begins. So John went throughout the area around the Jordan and used the tools God had laid out for him, "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" The basic meaning of *baptism* is applying water in some way to a thing or person. When a baptism is done at God's command and with his Word, there it is not just plain water, but **spiritual construction** going on as the old sinful soil is removed and washed away from our hearts and the gravel of God's grace is laid down and the forms of God's Word and the footings of his forgiveness are poured and cure. *Repentance* is a change of mind, a full 180 degree turn, sorrow over sin and sinfulness and a turning away from it, and turning toward our Savior God for rescue, redemption, and new life.

John's baptism gave, "*the forgiveness of sins.*" John's baptism looked ahead to the work of Christ – his ministry, his sacrifice for sins on the cross, and the empty tomb. Jesus' baptism looks back on all Christ has

done and connects us to it. In both you have the forgiveness of sins given. This is **the spiritual road construction** God does in your heart because your heart is important to God. Your soul and eternity is important to God.

“What are they doing?” may be your first reaction when the Willkommen sign is moved, or construction equipment is parked on your street. Your first reaction to what the Lord is doing in your life may feel the same. But God is working on you. *“As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, 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.”*

Construction sites can be messy. You don’t always see the big picture when you see the piles of dirt and debris. Sometimes the machinery is even hidden from view, or you can’t see what all is going on, but there is a plan and eventually it becomes clear. **Spiritual Construction sites are messy too.** Sometimes it is difficult to see what the Lord is doing in your heart as you struggle in life. Sometimes God is uncovering sin in your hearts, and he must dig and dig to get at the root of it, even use the backhoe or the power washer. It’s the sin that is deep seeded and has grown roots in your heart, it’s pride, maybe it’s lust or sinful desire, maybe it’s discontentment with what God has allotted to you vs. others. Maybe it’s greed. Maybe it’s overindulgence in food or drink. But God keeps digging, and exposing all those things that your sinful nature gravitates to and draws you further from your Lord.

We don’t like the digging, the moving of things in our soul or our lives. We get all too complacent with the way things look and are even if there is a sink hole below the surface or water is bubbling up through a crack like it was on South Broadway this week. We scoff at God’s blueprint or the arrival of machinery and the putting up of safety fences as God gets to work on our hearts working repentance – turning from our sin, sorrowing over it, and looking to our Savior. On our own we would leave it or make more of a mess. But **God has his hard hat on** and sends his **spiritual construction crews** to us with his Word and Sacraments.

What valleys is he filling in in your lives where bad habits and ungodly thoughts have left a depression? What mountains of arrogance and pride is he chipping away at in your hearts? Where has the way become so crooked by overindulgence or addiction it is difficult to navigate your life, and God is slowly straightening? What have you made rough with ruts and potholes of sin that God must fill in and smooth, even grade – and sometimes with what feels like a grader? Sometimes the way has become so difficult that we miss the good things God has us doing in life and the evil we wouldn’t do, this starts to look like the easier path. But God has his hard hat on, in his love for you, and he works to make a path, to straighten the path, to level the road so that you might live and you might be safe, and so that you have forgiveness, freedom and peace won by him, and so that you can see the bigger picture, what He has planned out for you.

Did you see the big picture? Did you catch it when Luke pointed it out, how God has everything prepared for your benefit? Like listing all the tools God would use whether they were witting or unwitting, Luke lists off the men God allowed to be in positions of power, men who would sadly misuse their power, but that God would bend to his good purposes, as Annas and Caiaphas judged him worthy of death and passed him on to Rome’s representative who tried to wash his hands, but sentenced him to die on a cross, and why did God allow all these painful things? Why did he send John like a spiritual starting gun on the sprint to salvation? He was making a spiritual road for the Messiah to come to your heart, and showing you the physical and factual road Jesus walked proclaiming freedom, submitting to a cross, bursting forth alive from the tomb, for your redemption. *“And all people will see God’s salvation.”*

From mad to thankful, we see it! God orchestrated all of it, bending the evil some would do to turn it for good for us, using, blessing, carrying out his blueprint so that your sins were paid for on Jesus’ cross, so that heaven is yours as a free gift, purchased at great cost, so that you have freedom to follow and run in God’s path, in his commands, standing in his grace, trusting him every step of the way because he’s prepared the way to your heart for the Messiah. Jesus Christ, the path to heaven, is yours, and he still rules and reigns over all for your good. **Advent: It’s the Season of Spiritual Road Construction. God fixes the road of your heart for the Savior’s arrival.** See your salvation. Trust his work. Enjoy the Advent of our King. Amen.