

As many of you are aware, my family lives in Green Bay. So, quite a few times a year I'll make the trip down there and back. And moreso on the way back, my least favorite part of that journey is just south of Crivitz. You're coming up out of Green Bay, cruising along at a good clip on a nice four-lane stretch of highway and then just past the highway 64 turnoff, well the speed limit drops and you lose a pair of lanes and for the rest of the trip you're slowing down through all the towns you have to come across or getting stuck behind one car or another. I know, it's not the worst thing in the world, but it was a lot easier on that stretch where the road just kept going straight and easy.

Now I know we could get sidetracked onto all kinds of things like how the four-lane stretch used to stop by Abrams or how travel before highways was even worse. But that's not the reason I bring all this up. I bring this up because of what John the Baptist had to say today about making a straight path. We much prefer the straight and easy road and we should keep that in mind when John is talking about the path Jesus has to take to our heart. We read from our Gospel today in Matthew 3: <read text: Matthew 3:1-12>.

John the Baptist was appointed as the forerunner of Christ. His role was prophesied hundreds of years ago as shown by the Isaiah quotation here. But what exactly *was* his role? What was his purpose in what he did? The prophecy talks about a voice calling in the wilderness to make straight paths for the Lord. What does that mean?

The original prophecy in context conjures up the image of an arriving king, and speaks further of the effort required in preparing his way. This king, this lord that was coming was someone that the people would want to be there. He was a champion, a hero. Someone who would fight their battles and help them in their troubles. And so whatever it took to make it easier for him to arrive, that was what they ought to do! If that meant leveling out a hill or filling in a valley to make the travel as smooth and simple as possible, then so be it! The important thing is that the hero was able to arrive to help them. As the wider context of the prophecy brings in, the people *needed* that help. And all of this was true, but not in the literal way many of them took it.

John the Baptist was there to fulfill this prophecy, but we only have to look at what he was doing to understand how this message was truly meant. He wasn't out in the desert terraforming the terrain to make nicer roads. John preached a message of repentance because the kingdom of heaven was near. And people who came to him came confessing their sins and looking to be baptized. In other words, John's message was to get people to recognize their own sinfulness. He called for them to acknowledge their crimes against God and to repent from those sins. To say, "What I have done is wrong, I am sorry I have done it, and I do not want to continue in it any longer!"

This is the level path that he was called to make. It was not a literal path through the desert but it was the path to the heart in each one of us. Now, Jesus is very clearly the Lord that the prophecy refers to. So what is the path he has to travel, and how is it that John's work prepared the path? Jesus came to offer the forgiveness of sins. He came to live as one of us and die as one of us in our place so we would not be held accountable for our sins. And the only part we play (if you can even call it that) is that we hold to him for our salvation. That we recognize and trust him for the forgiveness of sins.

But so many things surround a person's heart that normally make this impossible. There are so many mountains of pride and valleys of despair that the goal of Jesus reaching the heart can't happen. John's work levels out that path. The mountains of natural pride protect the heart like a fortress. The heart wants to say "I don't need anyone's help! I am a perfectly capable, independent person and I can make it on my own! I am a good person and I can live up to and meet whatever standards are set before me! Whatever troubles or challenges come my way, I will handle them!" And when the Lord Jesus comes knocking against this attitude offering salvation and forgiveness, the heart scoffs because in its pride it feels it has no need of forgiveness.

But John preached the one thing we all need before we can recognize our savior; the law of God. The law is dynamite when it strikes the heart that listens. Every mountain of pride standing in the way is blasted to rubble before the truth of God's law. The law is perfect and God demands perfect obedience to it and for all our might and bluster not one of us has managed to keep the law perfectly for an hour, let alone our lives. As the people who listened to John realized this, their own hearts were crushed, and they came to him admitting their faults, repenting of their sins.

And the path was prepared. Once the law has crushed the heart and obliterated our own pride, the path is prepared for the savior to come in. These people were ready for the savior when he came, they knew their need for forgiveness and so when the lamb of God came to take away the sin of the world, he was able to walk right into their heart without obstacle. And they would be saved because of this. We need Jesus to be saved, it is that simple. We need a sure trust of him in our heart for that to happen. And the only way he can get there is if the path is clear.

Of course, not everyone listened to John. Not everyone took to heart what he had to say about repenting. We see some of the Pharisees and Sadducees came out to see what all the fuss was about with this guy in the desert who dressed funny. And John knows their hearts. He knows what's going on there. And the example they give us is extremely important, because it's one of the most dangerous traps we can fall into that prevent the work of Jesus from being accomplished.

John lays it on them right away. "You brood of vipers!" he calls them. He knows they are not there to learn the truth. They are not approaching with hearts ready to be molded for Christ, they are coming to judge. They would not open their hearts to the idea that they had sin to repent from because their walls of pride were built so high and with such sturdy material. It was not that they were just full of pride in themselves, they were full of a very unique kind of pride that can prey even on you and me. They were full of pride in what they had done for God.

For all the hammering we do on the Pharisees, let's not lose sight of them in their historical context. They were the public "good guys". These were the people who had devoted their lives to God's service. They knew his word back and forth and they made every effort to live it correctly in their lives. And in a nation that was founded on the principle of the Lord as their God, this was a good, public thing they did. Their lives were shining examples of goodness to the people. They did many good things.

And yet, what does John say about them? He tells them to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance". They were doing outwardly good things, but it did not come from a heart that was right within. They were taking peace and comfort from the things they did for God, instead of recognizing that even their best work was tainted with sin. And even if that failed, they fell back on the comfort that Abraham was their father and God made a promise to Abraham about all his children. But John lays it out plain. It is not what we do that makes us saved. No amount of good-intentioned work for the Lord will ever please him enough to cover over the sin we have committed. And it is not who we are that makes us saved. Our lineage or family history has nothing to do with salvation.

The only thing that matters is if Christ is in our hearts. Now you and I here today, we have had the law work on our hearts, we have had the pride within us knocked down, if not perfectly, then enough for Christ to make his way in. We acknowledge our sinfulness and we recognize our need for a savior. But like the landscape of the world, the landscape of the heart is deceptive because it does not remain stationary. It seems like it does, but over time, new mountains try to form, new obstacles creep up to get in the way of our Lord. And if his access to our heart is cut off by new mountains of pride, then his presence within us can be lost. We need to be watching the path carefully our whole lives. And with the power of God's word we need to blast out the hills of pride before they become immovable mountains.

There are all kinds of obstacles that can be formed in our lives that accomplish this. Some of them are obvious; selfish pursuits of recreation that are clearly taking away from God in our lives. Some are more deceptive. God is slowly cut out from our lives in the name of noble pursuits like career or family or even helping others. In fact the most dangerous is the very trap the Pharisees fell into; the pride they had in their own service to God. They were so convinced that God was so happy with their work they felt that God owed them something and they had a right to look down on and judge others.

Watch the path to your heart carefully and keep it clear. Let nothing come between you and your Lord Jesus. As we talked about last week, he will come very suddenly and without warning. As John puts it here he will know the wheat from the chaff and the chaff is going destroyed in fire. But the wheat, those that have Jesus in their heart as Lord, the wheat is going to be gathered up into his barn. When the path is clear and Jesus is with each of us in our heart, we have true joy. Yeah, there's a real warning to be had about losing that, but don't let that be your focus. Look to the joy we have in knowing our sins are forgiven. The joy we have in knowing that when he comes for each of us that means all our pain and toilsome effort is going to be at an end. Having the Lord Jesus in our heart means that our joy and contentment in this life is complete. The clearer the path to our heart, the more that joy and peace grows.

So take a look on the path. Is it as clear as it could be? Of course not, there's always a new problem trying to get in the way between us and our God. Return to his word and use the power of it to remove whatever obstacles are still there. Make it easy for Jesus to walk right in and be with us. Make a straight path for the Lord and let him increase your joy. Amen.