

When the Lord Comes Near 3) He Humbles His Enemies

Luke 3:7-18 • 2021-12-12 • Advent Series "When the Lord Comes Near"



In the early 1950's the road to Payson from the valley was desolate, rough, and hazardous. But a county supervisor, Jim Hart, wanted a better road to his summer home in Payson. He helped devise a better route up to Payson through the Mazatzal mountains. It's interesting to read about the work on the "Beeline Highway." It wasn't easy. Some workers described the jack hammers getting so hot they couldn't even handle them. One man described how the constant shaking from the jackhammers would make his hands swell up to twice their size. The constant drilling and blasting of dynamite took a toll on the hearing of the workers. Rocks would fly from the dynamite blasts. Many reported severe headaches from the inescapable blasting fumes. I was surprised to read one account of a man who had to jump out of his dump truck just before it rolled off a cliff. His brakes had failed. By the late 1950s they laid the first pavement connecting Payson with the valley. Eventually all the route was expanded to be the four-lane-highway which we now enjoy. Today someone can make the trip in just over an hour from Payson to the valley 4000 feet below. Ninety minutes will get you down to an international airport. But it took a lot of work. Mountains had to be carved and canyons had to be bridged.

Today we consider another major roadway construction. Its chief supervisor was even more influential than Jim Hart. His name was John. His highway work began in the land of Israel. He was different from the typical Roman engineer of his era. And he didn't look at all like a modern county supervisor. He came on the scene looking like something the dog chased away—all dressed in camel's hair. That's because John's mission was very different. John's project manager was God. And his building plans had been revealed from the beginning of time. His route was revealed for over 2000 years. And his highway was long expected.

The project goal was unique. God's plan wasn't just a response to congestion or a need for faster, safer travel. It was to deal with the deadly and ruined path of sinners. His highway had one single purpose: to prepare the way for the Lord. We read about John's highway project last Sunday from earlier in Luke chapter 3: "*Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.*" He was to work on making a level way in the hearts of all so they might be ready for the Lord's coming.

John's tools seem unusual, no jackhammer, no dynamite. His tools were for working with hearts. For that kind of work, only God's tools would do. John used God's powerful Word and his powerful means of grace, baptism.

John knew his work had to be done quickly, so he didn't waste any time. First things first, he cleared away all the dangerous wildlife in the area. Some snakes that had to be driven off the work site. *John kept saying to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"* You see, the Pharisees and Sadducees were completely unprepared for the pavement John poured. It would only bury them. By calling them offspring of vipers, he is saying they are offspring of Satan. They weren't at all ready for the Lord's coming. They thought they had enough credentials to make it. They were so proud that they belonged to Abraham! In pride they didn't even notice their sins. John warned them that the Lord's coming was imminent. And it didn't bode well for the sinner, no matter how much they tried to hold out their membership cards.

The ax was already at the root of the tree. The Ax Man wouldn't stop his progress simply because these vipers claimed to be good people. Outwardly they may have appeared to be good people. But there was no repentance over sin, only pride. What good is a dead branch on this highway? Only good for burning. The Ax Man would take it and toss it into the flames. The unmoving rock was only fit for the dynamite, and to be laid low with its unrelenting power.

John's warning is still for all who feel they have no sin or need to repent. A false façade of holiness won't do when it comes to God's justice. The one who says, "*God can't judge me, my dad's a pastor*" or "*my parents were founding members of a congregation*" or "*I hold membership in one of conservative Lutheran churches,*" better take heed! They must make sure they aren't relying on that membership card and overlooking their sin. All who belong to God's church only outwardly will end up facing the ax of judgment, and the fire of God's wrath over sin. They will die as his enemies and forever remain under his curse over sin. When the Lord comes near, he humbles his enemies. If they won't heed the warning over sin, they will face his judgment. If they do, they will most certainly be humbled before his coming.

God humbles his enemies. But he does it so that in humble repentance they turn to him! After dealing with the unrepentant snakes, John addressed the remaining roadwork. It included the hearts of the common people of the crowds, including the poor, the wealthy, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. These people admitted they were unprepared and were sinners. The tax collectors all had a reputation for cheating. The soldiers all had a bad rap for using their authority to get what they want. These aren't the first people you'd expect to enter as "members of St. John's Church by the Jordan River." But that is the designer's plan! He humbles his enemies so that they turn to him.

With humbled hearts the people heard of the forgiveness of sins. They were baptized by John and forgiven of all their sins. Then repentance and faith began to produce new fruits. "*The crowds began to ask him, "What should we do*

then?" He answered them, "Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptized. They said, "Teacher, what should we do?" To them he said, "Collect no more than what you were authorized to." Soldiers were also asking him, "And what should we do?" He told them, "Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages."

John's instructions to the repentant seem painfully obvious, don't they? Of course, if someone doesn't have food and is destitute you should not let them starve! So simple! Same with your possessions. Show mercy when mercy should be shown. He told the tax collectors not to cheat people. Was this a sudden revelation to them? The soldiers came asking what they should be doing. His instruction is so simple! "Don't use your authority to push people around!" Maybe toss in a little dash of humility along with some compassion for the lowly in status. Once again, you almost read it and wonder, "Didn't they know it was wrong to be a bully with their authority?"

Sometimes roadbuilding with repentance means pointing out the obvious. Have you ever lost your cool until someone had to tell you that you were out of line? Have you ever noticed someone with a drinking problem who didn't want to admit it? Have you ever struggled to see exactly what sins you were struggling with from day to day?

The work of preparing hearts can be difficult. Some hearts are so blind to their own sin that they have to be blasted with the dynamite of God's law. They must be told, "you will not stand if you think you are without sin and have no need of repentance." Other hearts feel the constant wearing down of sin but don't know what the correct fruits of repentance are. Their sin has worn down their path so much they might assume it can never be changed. They need someone to show them the law not only as a blasting dynamite, but also as a guide for those who walk with new hearts of faith. That takes time and patience. It is sometimes the painfully obvious sin which the repentant believer might struggle with. Once a sinner repents, they need the guidance in God's will. Sometimes their sin has taken such a hold over their heart that they don't recognize it as sin anymore! It happens from the habitual denial of sin. Christians will struggle with sin. They will sometimes need their sin exposed. And when they repent, they will sometimes need guidance. It sounds like such a messy building project! Stubborn rocks that won't move must be blasted and those that are movable must be put in the right place! God's building project isn't clean. It is messy. It includes sinners.

Does this offend us? Are we bothered by the fact that John is ushering the tax collector and Roman soldier at the head of the way for the Lord's coming? It shouldn't. It should comfort us. John's goal wasn't to prepare people who had never sinned. It was to prepare a sinful people who knew they had sinned. The Church's holiness does not consist in the holy life of its members. It consists of the holiness of Christ. It's not the Church's job to cleanse its hands of adulterers, the sexually impure, the greedy, murderers, bullies, abusive men and women, drunkards, addicts, gossips, and liars. It's the Church's job to cleanse their hands in the washing waters of baptism and through faith in the blood of Christ. All of us need the law. Every believer was once God's enemy and is now struggling to identify with what it means to live as his forgiven child. Every believer needs the law to convict them and turn them to Christ. And every believer needs the law to show them how to live for Christ and to guide them in a new life.

Where are you in your attitude toward sin? Are you struggling with seeing yourself as a sinner? "Watch out!" John says. Or are you a repentant sinner needing guidance on how to live a new life of faith? "Listen up!" John says. I used to keep a tally of how many times I drove the Beeline down to the valley from Payson. I've lost the exact count. It would be impossible for us to count the number of times we must humble ourselves before our God. We must repent more often in our lives than the times we tap the brakes while driving through the mountains.

But we need more than that. John's preaching centered around the good news about Jesus. John warned the people of God's coming judgment. But he comforted them with the rescue and eternal home prepared for those who trust in the Lord. "Then with many other words, he appealed to them and was preaching good news to the people."

John really had his work cut out for him. Yes, he was sent to expose the sin of the unrepentant. But he was also sent to comfort those who longed for release from sin. He was sent to proclaim the mercy of God. The Father in mercy sent his Son to take on human flesh to become the sacrificial Lamb. He was sent to preach the good news of God keeping his long-promised highway construction plan. A highway which consisted of "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Jesus opened the way to heaven by himself and his blood shed for sin. He is the ultimate builder of God's roadway and of God's house. He is good news for a world lost on its broken path. He is the freely given way to paradise.

The Beeline Highway project was a game changer for everyone who traveled to Payson. But until today's four lane version was complete it was still fraught with dangers. Ironically Jim Hart himself died in a car accident at the start of the route. And things weren't all perfect on route. For example, over 150 people died traveling the Beeline highway from the sixteen-year span when I was born until I was old enough to drive a car.

Our Lord has made a sure and perfect way to something far greater than the paradise of Payson. He has made the way for us to enter his eternal kingdom and our eternal home. And it's not a road laid by the work of sinners. It is a perfect road laid by our Lord. His road isn't traveled by the proud. It is traveled by the humble who in faith trust in him.