

God Builds His Advent Highway

☆ From the desert through the waters (vv.1-4)

☆ Past the narrows to the wide open spaces (vv.4-6)

In the name of Christ our Redeemer who came to suffer once, and will come again as Judge, dear friends:

A couple years ago there was a flurry of reality shows about Alaska on cable TV. One I really enjoyed was *Gold Rush* which included the old gold miner John Schnabel and his teenage grandson Parker Schnabel who took over for him. The intersection between them is Roger Schnabel, John's son and Parker's father. Roger is a road builder. Whenever Parker needed a new cut on the old mine, his dad would show up with the heavy equipment and build a new road. With all our complaining by Twin Cities commuters, I wonder how many could do a better job of rebuilding highways and keep traffic flowing.

Years ago on my Granddad's ranch I got a taste of one heavy machine. Mr. Chess, the hired man, put me on a 680 Case backhoe to dig a holding pond. He showed me how to operate the levers and foot pedals, then walked away. For the next twenty minutes I was totally lost. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Mr. Chess watching. Finally he came over and asked, "What are you doing?" "Trying to make this bucket dump dirt," I answered, a little annoyed. "Let me show you again," he said. He sat down with hands flying and feet in sync so that bucket was digging and dumping.... "I can't do that!" "Yes you can! Stop thinking and just do it." So I did and before too long the pond was coming along nicely. That was just digging a hole. **Advent** needs a **Highway**. Who's going to build that?

☆ From the desert through the waters (vv.1-4)

The world flying by on the freeways doesn't care. They're a lot like *Tiberias Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias* – Roman rulers looking for gold, fame and power. Some of us are more like proud high priests *Annas* and son-in-law *Caiaphas* seeking all the wealth and influence of their position. None of them cared about God's ancient promises of a Savior. They cared even less when a man wearing camel skin and eating locusts and wild honey started preaching out in the desert.

Our natural born nature could not get us off the highway to hell, much less take up the task of building an **Advent Highway**. 400 years before John the Baptist, the Old Testament prophet Malachi in our First Lesson announced God would send what we all need, something far greater than gold. "*The messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*" says the **LORD Almighty**. (Malachi 3:1) Fact is, we were all too busy to even desire Him except that He would "*sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.*" He even purifies the pastors whom Malachi calls "*Levites,*" temple workers, "*purify...and refine them like gold and silver.*" God had a plan for where His **Advent Highway** was leading: "*Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,...offerings...acceptable to the LORD....*"

You and I could not build a highway on this earth with heavy equipment using dirt, gravel, cement and asphalt. How could we possibly build this **Advent Highway** from the holy God to human hearts like ours – weighed down as we are with discontent and worry, jealousy and envy, sins on the inside where we can't even see? But God loves us from the inside out. **God Builds His Advent Highway**.

Seeing John the Baptist out there in the desert is a good way to picture life without God. We're all born out there, far from water. Have you ever seen someone so dehydrated they completely lose their bearings, forget who they are. The dry heat of life can sap your spiritual strength even when it's raining and snowing outside. But John's preaching kept pointing the way out of our death valley of sin. He kept "*preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,*" literally, "*into the forgiveness of sins.*"

God was using His Word proclaimed by John to build His **Advent Highway** right **From the desert** of sin and unbelief **through the waters** of Baptism. This is what Paul called, *“the Holy Spirit’s washing of rebirth”* – that’s *born again* – *“and renewal which he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”* Nothing lifts the spirits of a thirsty soul like a good drink of clear water from the Holy Spirit. You can drink again every time you think of your baptism and hear this gracious invitation from God. The Holy Spirit works in us that change of heart called *“repentance.”* It’s His gift to you again this **Advent** as God uses John’s message to **Build His Advent Highway...**

✧ **Past the narrows to the wide open spaces (vv.4-6)**

John was Jesus’ forerunner, really the last prophet of the Old Testament. But seven centuries before John the Baptist the Holy Spirit inspired Isaiah to tell about his ministry and even share his message. John was *“a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘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 mankind will see God’s salvation.’”*

This is picture language to describe unbelief as it shows itself in heights of pride or depths of depression. It’s where we all struggle with disappointment in ourselves, in our relationships, losses at work or hard health at home. Life seems to be pressing in on us like a deep, dark valley with twisted roads and sharp brambles and briars. It’s like the time I led my friend deep into the forest behind our house because, “I know these woods like the back of my hand.” We finally came to where I was sure of a way out, but a huge wall of blackberries was in the way. The sun was shining through the break in the forest, but I could not find a way through. When I was really starting to wonder what to do, I heard my older brother calling in the woods. It’s a good thing Roc showed up. He was like our Dad, could always remember the way out. And when you and I are lost, the Holy Spirit sends His messenger like John the Baptist or a fellow Christian to point us back to Christ and His light, His truth, His love once again.

Do you know what this means, *“All mankind will see God’s salvation.”* *“Salvation”* in Old Testament Hebrew is YASHAH, the same word for *Jesus*. It literally means *a wide way*. It’s what God provided when He took off the burden of our guilt and sin. Then He leads us **Past the narrows** of depression and sorrow out **to the wide open spaces** of His all-forgiving grace. Don’t ever doubt. God is always watching over you and even following you when you get lost. **God Builds His Advent Highway.**

Sometimes we Christians get really proud of our humility. We look around at the really “arrogant” people – like scholars who think they are smarter than God or theologians who don’t believe a word God says, even though He put it in writing for them. But while we’re looking around at all these “mountains” of pride, we don’t realize the magma of our own insolence rising up like a volcano from beneath. Before we know it, the dome of our pride is high and rising. Thank God for **Advent!** His grace preaches the law to us too in order to bring us down where we belong with our humble Savior – crucified, risen, and now exalted by God. He knows how to humble the haughty. He also raises up the lowly.

You know that humility is the most illusive of Christian virtues. As soon as you think you have it, you’ve lost it. So we need to let God take care of it. Let God be the Master Builder. We’re making way for an eternal *Gold Rush* where it’s not John Schnabel, but John the Baptist pointing the way. You can “Roger” that. And God’s **Advent Highway** leads all the way to that city where the streets are paved with shining gold, clear as crystal. You don’t need the Cable Guy to “Git-er dun.” We just need God’s road crew of Word and sacrament, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He’ll bring us home. That’s pure gold. Amen.