

Road Construction Ahead
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
[Sermon Germination Group: Grace Crosby and Tim Nash]
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
9 December 2007
Text: Matthew 3:1-12

One of you sent me a photograph that appeared in the *Plain Dealer* last week depicting a worship service led by the latest televangelists to make the news. The local husband-and-wife duo were caught on stage, mid-song, both in writhing ecstasy with expressions of other-worldly rapture. Creepy. Laughable. I want nothing to do with religion like that—an insult to the intelligence, manipulative, andwell, sweaty.

The sermon germination group who met to discuss today's gospel text bumped up against our visceral dislike and strong mistrust of such religious perspective, because the first word out of the mouth of John the Baptist is "repent." Repent! And it's not presented as a suggestion, but as a dire warning: Repent....or get burned up in unquenchable fire. Well! Yet far from producing anxiety about the urgency of its message, the correlation between this warning to repent and sweating fundamentalism repelled us and made it easy to dismiss John's ranting. We'll just wait for the precious, inoffensive little baby in the manger, thank you very much.

Which might have worked, except that someone noticed that John's most condemning words are leveled against...exactly that kind of religious expression. Absolute certainty; arrogance; a sense of entitlement. The religious leaders merited judgment because they thought they were too good for it. If you approve of the way the world is and your place in that world, why behave any differently? But what about all those others—the people who were drawn to John's message announcing the One who is coming soon? What did they hear that kindled excitement; buzz; hope? Listen for God's Word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the third chapter at the first verse. [MATTHEW 3:1-12]

So I hopped on a bus at University Circle and zipped downtown on Euclid Avenue in 15 minutes. Very swift, very smooth, very convenient. And only in my dreams—so far. The Euclid Corridor Project is designed to connect two vital centers of our city, and promote economic development in both. Construction on the massive project has been underway for more than a year, and another year will pass by before the bus system is actually operating. Like everyone else, I've avoided Euclid Avenue as much as possible, but after a *Plain Dealer* article reported that the street construction was virtually complete, I ventured upon it, almost instantly regretting my decision. Various lanes were blocked by orange traffic cones, others required turning, the overhead directional signals seemed to bear no relationship to reality on the ground, and the other drivers appeared to be as confused and tentative as I was. At least there was no danger from high speed collision because we were basically at a dead crawl!

I had been going downtown to attend a presentation by Advance Northeast Ohio on Cleveland's renaissance, in which the Euclid Corridor Project provides an important component. The parallels between this and our text helped to redeem both. The road out of the wilderness is under construction. The way of the Lord requires some preparation—some building and re-building and renovation—before it can be a route to God's kingdom of peace and justice. In the middle of it all, it helps to keep the outcome in mind.

It has always been the role of the biblical prophets to hold God's promises before the people as a call to re-construct their lives in light of them. In other words, to notice the discrepancy between the reality described by these promises and the way things are, and to change the way things are. The severity of John's message reflects its importance. The way of the Lord will bring people to the city of dreams—the new Jerusalem in which all enjoy the fruit of righteous labor and live together in harmony with one another and the whole creation. When was the last time you went down *that* road??!

...which, when you think about it, is exactly the point. We try to avoid road construction at all costs. The promises of faith are just too....idealistic to be believed. They're so far from reality we find it hard even to imagine. We settle for a merry little Christmas when God wants to give us a whole new world. But that world cannot come merely by tweaking this, adjusting that. No, it will mean transformation—akin to the fire that refines rough ore into strong steel; a road construction project worthy of the city of hope.

John the Baptist invited the people to renew their construction contract, because the contractor is coming to evaluate our plans and building materials. Clearly this text signals the coming judgment, but too often it's been wielded as a sledgehammer against persons and groups *humans* have judged to be inadequate and unworthy. Religious belief has been used as the yardstick to divide persons into "wheat" and "chaff," with the consequence of reward or the unquenchable fire. But that's a serious misreading of the text. Religious orthodoxy - represented by the Pharisees and Sadducees—counts for nothing in God's realm. God can turn stones into pious believers. Our pedigree, our membership, our privilege mean nothing in an eternal sense. The only thing that matters is the fruit we produce—is it good?

What if our interpretation of John's message moved beyond dividing people into groups of "good" and "bad" and thought instead of the parts of ourselves that need cultivation. God's judgment then seems not terrifying but transforming, extended not to destroy us but to deliver us. The chaff of wheat is not so much evil as it is unnecessary. It doesn't provide nourishment and in fact dilutes the rich nutrients found in the grain. The fire of God's judgment burns completely what is false in us, what is hypocritical, or hurtful or whatever hides our true identity as God's beloved child.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were called to judgment not primarily for their failure to produce good fruit, but for their insistence that they already were. They were satisfied, complacent, and assured of their place among God's inner circle. Why go through the headache and expense of road construction? We don't need to go downtown anyway!

Still, we hear John calling: *Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.* And there is absolutely no way to do that without repentance, without turning in a different direction. I tried to avoid it; I really did. I even consulted an on-line thesaurus to find a way to say it without using the “c” word. But here’s what I got: alter, amend, convert, modify, revolutionize. The good new day comes by way of change, road construction, investment and building, research and development.

I smiled at the irony of a series of full-page ads that have appeared in national newspapers this month. They are part of campaign to encourage charitable giving, and the tag line is “Let’s re-define Christmas.” One ad explained, *no sooner does Thanksgiving end, than the chaotic shopping season begins—a month-long compulsion to buy something, anything, for everyone. We’re pressed. We’re stressed. And our money is wasted. But we can change all that by focusing on the giving. And redefining Christmas. Please consider charitable giving as a gift option this year.* Of course I applaud the focus of that campaign—it’s just the sadly funny commentary on what the season has become—and the need to “re-define” a season that began as God’s gift of love to the whole world. God loved imperfection so much that God sent the One who can set it right. We can reclaim that definition by examining our lives in the light of God’s gift, noticing the discrepancies, and taking steps to make them reflect God’s love more truly and more clearly. Giving money to help persons in need gain access to earth’s bounty is certainly one good way to respond.

You have demonstrated other ways too. Last Sunday in worship, I asked you to draw two objects and then to show how they might get connected. I’ve prepared a display of your drawings because they are amazing, thoughtful, out-of-the-box ideas for connecting with others in ways that build community and heal divisions. Someone drew people dancing, their hands joined in a circle of motion and delight. Someone showed two torn pieces of paper, joined together with tape. One person had drawn a strange-looking animal with two heads; on closer inspection you could see that one head was a donkey, the other an elephant. One of

the pictures showed two cities, miles apart, and an airplane traveling between the two. Several depicted symbols of the world's religions, grouped together, lines touching. And one simply had circles labeled "blue" and "red" and the part that overlapped, "purple." (all the pictures may be viewed at coffee hour in Andersen Hall) In ways both literal and metaphorical, you offered ideas to help build the highway for our God, a road towards God's kingdom of light and life. And yesterday, our church seemed like a construction site! First, members extended hospitality, fellowship, and hot lunch to sixty guests with Project Renewal, many who are physically and/or mentally challenged. As they were leaving, additional volunteers arrived to help set up and serve a meal to 250, most of whom were strangers to us, family members and friends grieving the tragic deaths of three children in a house fire in Shaker last week. Our staff worked overtime, but we couldn't have done it without help, and I felt proud of the way this congregation put hands and feet on the sympathy universally felt in the face of this horrific loss. As she left, the mother whose deep sadness I can only imagine warmly thanked us, saying "I hope God will bless you by the blessings you have given us."

Friends, that God can transform heartache into blessing defies logic. That God will do so by means of human caring -by our hands - invites our participation in life's greatest enterprise. It's worth every dollar, every hour, every act of caring, every inconvenience of lives and a world under construction, when you remember the outcome: *the kingdom of heaven has come near.*
AMEN. [Lead into silent meditation by Diane Gent]

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