

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Midweek Advent Service – December 7th, 2011

Isaiah 40:3-8 – “A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”

Dear children of God who are led by God's Law and Gospel to live lives of repentance,

For the past couple of years our community has been in the middle of a fairly large road construction project. The widening of highway 26 from Fort Atkinson to just north of Watertown and the building of bypasses around Jefferson and Watertown has been very obvious. How could anyone miss it? There have been lots of large machines moving dirt. The hills had to be leveled and the low spots had to be filled in. This new road took lots of work and planning. The roadbed had to be laid and compacted so that there was no settling. Graders and dump trucks have been constantly leveling the road so that the final layer of concrete can be laid on top of the perfectly level roadbed. And what a happy site it was for the day that we were finally able to drive on this new 4 lane road. It is straight, smooth and level. It took a lot of work to get where we are at, but we have to admit that the project is still far from being completed. The bypass still has more work to be done. It seems like it will never end.

As we look into the hearts of God's people, we can see that there is also a form of road construction going on. There are low spots that need to be filled in and some high spots that need to be filled in so that the path in our hearts is straight. And just like the road construction going on around us, the road construction in our hearts will never end. As long as we live in this world, our sinful hearts need to be under construction. We call this construction -- repentance. Repentance is one of the key words of this text and it is one of the key themes of Advent. Truthfully, repentance is one of the key words every day in the life of God's people. So today we will see that:

SERMON THEME: Advent Brings A Call For Repentance

- 1. By God making the highway straight**
- 2. By God filling in the valleys**
- 3. By God making every mountain low**

As we begin this section on repentance, we need to remember first of all that we cannot repent by ourselves. We cannot repent because we are so strong or because we are better than other people. We can't wake up one morning and say that we want to repent. Repentance can only take place where God is working in our hearts. God uses his powerful and condemning Law with all of its crushing power, and God also uses his equally powerful, soothing Gospel which assures us that we are forgiven and gives us the strength to trust in God's work. God's Law leads us to see our sin and feel sorry for that sin and his Gospel fills our hearts with the spiritual comfort that we need.

So with this in mind we need to realize that Isaiah isn't writing about building the highway, but about God making his way into our hearts and fixing and repairing this highway, **“In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged**

places a plain.” There are some deep valleys that are hard for God to get around as he makes his way into our hearts. Some of the valleys the devil has dug. Some we have dug ourselves. When we are so low, so down on ourselves that we believe there’s no hope for us, then we have given up on God, too. When we’re that low, doubt is in charge, and it keeps faith locked in the basement. God wants to come to us and embrace us as a Father, hugging his dearly loved children, but instead, we prefer to lie on the floor and scream, “Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me.” That’s the barrier God has to overcome. That’s the valley that God has to raise up.

Sometimes we run into obstacles in our lives that seem to dig the valley for us. Perhaps you have some health problem. Maybe there is a certain person who has treated you terribly. You’ve suffered a great financial loss. “If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all.” The devil loves to use these experiences to make the children of God feel like losers. “See,” he says, “you’re failing. You must have done something to deserve this!” But Jesus says, **“In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33).** Nothing is so big or so terrible that it can take the power out of the promise of God. God may have a way to make the bad work out for good.

Now it is true that God gives his law to show us our sins, to break our hearts, to make us see our guilt. God does that so that we will turn to him, confess our sins, and receive his free forgiveness. When God forgives, he **“hurl[s] all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19).** Our all-knowing God “forgets” our sins forever, because our guilt was taken by Jesus. John the Baptist called Jesus **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** When we hear that Jesus is Savior of the world, we can believe, without any doubt, that nobody is left out. Nobody is too bad to be forgiven by God. This is God’s promise— that there is forgiveness for all. Forgiveness for you. God wants you. He wants to call you his dearly loved child. Your hard service is completed. You don’t need to worry and fret. God has taken your burden.

The hard times and bad experiences may be God’s bulldozer that also lays low the mountains. Yes, there are mountains in God’s way. Sometimes, instead of groveling around in the depths, feeling sorry for ourselves, we’re high on ourselves. We’re so high up, no one can reach us. We think we’ve got it made. Everything we want, we have. And when we hear God preaching to us, “Thou shalt.... thou shalt not,” we’re so high on ourselves that we say, “I don’t need any of that. I am the master of my own destiny. I don’t care about sin, and I don’t really need a Savior. I don’t need to be saved from anything. Life is great. Nobody can tell me anything. If I don’t like what the preacher is telling me, I’ll just tell myself it doesn’t apply, and that it’s his interpretation.” That self-comfort is comfort of the wrong variety. That’s being comfortable without God. In the end it will be no comfort at all. Watch out! God’s bulldozer is rolling. When God says that he is a “jealous God,” he means that he doesn’t tolerate any rivals. That means that he won’t be number two in anyone’s heart. The mountains of pride and of deceiving ourselves have to come down for God to come to us.

In Isaiah’s preaching, we hear that bulldozer rumbling. God told him to preach, **“All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ... The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”** All human glory is like the flowers of the field. God is speaking to us about the things that *we* are proud of. Everything has its day, and then it’s gone. That’s the way it is with grass and flowers. That’s the way it is with everything else we would enjoy. What are you most proud of? Your new car? Every new car eventually gets its first scratch, its first rust spot. Or is it your dream house you worked on for years?. For every house there is a day when the first doorknob falls off. Or is it your business? A change in the market or in consumer demand can wipe a business out. Everything we buy or make to make ourselves proud or happy doesn’t last. That’s the way of the world. What are you proud of? What is your glory? Is it your home, your car, your wealth? Is it your good health? Is it simply “getting your way” in everything? The time will come when all those things are gone.

Only one thing lasts forever. **“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”** Isn’t it tragic that people sometimes pay so much attention to what you can see, and

overlook the things you can't see? I remember a woman in tears, crying because she really wanted to donate something to Church in memory of her mother. I don't really remember exactly what it was, and that isn't that important. I wasn't going to say no to her request. Nobody else was either. But this was a reason for her to cry. I'm not saying that the gift was wrong or that shedding tears about something earthly is wrong, but I think we sometimes tend to think about the things we can see and touch more than the things that really count. Shouldn't we cry instead for the children who aren't brought to Sunday school? Shouldn't we cry because people are stuck in their valleys or on their mountain peaks, so stuck on themselves that they won't cling to the Lord? The work of the Word of the Lord is something we can't see. The people walk in. I preach a sermon. The people walk out, and they look the same. But there is a great work being done. Valleys are being filled in. Mountains leveled. God changes people as they hear his Word.

God's work is not irresistible. When God comes with his comfort, we can keep digging the valleys deeper as he's trying to fill them in. He runs after us and we run away from him. Isaiah's hearers did that. John the Baptist's hearers did that. Jesus' hearers did that. The results were a disaster. For Isaiah's readers it meant the loss of their temple and their land and seventy years in captivity. For John and Jesus' listeners rejecting the message was the final rejection of God's covenant. They too lost their temple and property and their lives, but worse than any of those, they lost what God had promised. God promised Jesus the Savior, and sent him to be our only comfort. He alone can be the light in our world's darkness. He alone can walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. In our darkest hour, he won't offer us a cushy mattress for comfort. Instead, he gives us himself. All else may be gone. In his holy wisdom, he may decide that we need to lose everything so that we can see him more clearly.* The psalmist wrote, **"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is my strength and my portion forever"** (Psalm 73:25-26). Amen.