

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 2nd Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015

Your Personal Construction Project

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Luke 1:68-79 Malachi 3:1-4 Philippians 1:3-11 Luke 3:1-6

Three years ago I discussed the same scripture passages as the four that I read this morning. It was the second Sunday of Advent as it is today.

My sermon title three years ago was "God's Construction project" and I used examples of road construction in my message. *"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain made low. The crooked roads become straight, the rough ways smooth."*

There are two allusions in these words from Luke 3. The first is preparing the road for the King to come, the King of course being Christ.

The other allusion is preparing yourself for the second coming --- straightening out the imperfections in your spiritual life.

You probably noticed that our Psalm this morning was not from the Psalter but rather was a Canticle from Luke 1, the song of Zechariah. This Canticle is sometimes called the Benedictus. It is a Jewish prayer of blessing, in this case a blessing upon Zechariah's son, John the Baptizer and a reference to Jesus, the Christ.

John the Baptizer, you may recall, was given his name by the angel Gabriel, not by his father. The custom of the time was that the first born son was always named for his father, in this case Zechariah. John's importance is not in who he was but what he did in relation to Jesus and in preparing people for the Second Coming of Christ. John traveled throughout the area around the River Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He called for repentance but unlike Christian baptism, his baptism did not provide for forgiveness of future sins, only for past sins. It was simply a step in people preparing themselves for the coming of the Messiah.

Our reading from Malachi similarly was one of telling people of preparation. The name "Malachi" is not that of a prophet but rather is a word simply meaning "messenger." In our reading we are told that a dignitary, the Messiah, will be coming and that people will have their evil ways burned or smelted away as happens to

impurities when refining metal in a smelter's fire. The reading also refers to launderer's soap to cleanse people.

The messenger is coming as God's agent to consume human flaws, their impurities, in the same way in which a metallurgist's fire consumes the dross in metals or in the way a strong detergent removes soil from clothes. Just as in our reading from Luke 3, the messenger will fill our valleys of sin and level our mountains of sin and despair and smooth out our road to salvation.

Our reading from Philippians is partially a prayer for the church at Philippi and a thank you for their gifts in support of Paul's work but, more importantly, it is a reference to the Second Coming of Christ. In verse 6 Paul says, "...*he who began a good work in you will carry it out to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" The day of Christ Jesus is the Parousia, the Second Coming. Note that the reference to "*a good work in you*" is stated to be carried on until it is completed. What does that mean?

John the Baptizer baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Malachi talks about a continual refining and cleansing process. Luke talks about filling valleys, leveling mountains, and straightening out and smoothing crooked roads --- human imperfections --- not actual highway construction work.

All three are talking about human construction, your personal construction projects.

Paul prays "*that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ --- to the glory and praise of God.*"

Our personal construction project is an ongoing project. Eugene Peterson's The Message rephrases Paul's admonition to tell us, "*Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.*"

Your personal project is one of continually refining and cleansing yourself in preparation for the Parousia. Not only that, it is also to bring others to Christ.

My friend the Rev. Edyth Pruitt, in an Advent sermon about three years ago, commented that if your spiritual life is the same as it was five years ago, perhaps you need to reconsider your spiritual life.

She is correct. We can't sit around doing things as we always have. Preparing for Christ requires more, much more, than attending worship each Sunday and dutifully making your tithe. It requires ongoing effort to do the work of God in the community and in the world.

Just as the newly constructed highway will eventually fall apart if it is not maintained and improved, so will you deteriorate spiritually and in the eyes of God if you neglect your personal faith construction project.

The Kingdom of God lies within each of us, but so does sin. What are we going to be in the future? We have not fulfilled our Christian calling so long as people are hungry --- so long as there are people who have not been brought to Christ --- so long as people are living alone without someone to care for them --- so long as we personally do not make the effort to reach out to others, to invite people in, and to pray for all of God's people. In order to be who we were called to be, we need to seriously consider what God wants us to be.

Amen.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011, unless otherwise noted.