

# Advent Highway

## Luke 3:1-6

### A highway through the wilderness

I grew up in the north-east of Victoria, in a small country town, right in the heart of the Victorian High Country. (It's called Mitta Mitta.) I have a bizarre memory of a particular sightseeing trip that my family would do when I was a child. We would pack a picnic lunch and then leave home and drive for about 30 km, even further into the bush than we already were.

My memory is of driving along a brand new, two-way asphalt road that would take us smoothly and quickly into the mountains. The road was state of the art. It was level and surprisingly flat. There were bridges that spanned deep ravines and gullies. In places it looked as though they had moved entire mountains so that the road wouldn't turn too sharply. There were smooth sweeping curves that somehow found their way around steep mountain ridges. Inside the car, we could watch some of the roughest country imaginable slide smoothly past us.

Eventually, however, we would arrive at the end of this marvellous road. The bitumen would come to sudden halt and turn into dirt. Then the dirt would turn into a rugged rocky muddy bush track — churned up by the wheels of heavy machinery. And then, the road would suddenly end. There would be nothing but the thickest bush, and at that point, of course, you could go no further.

Eventually they completed this road, and at the end of it they built a township to house 6000 construction workers, and after that they built the Dartmouth Dam. That massive project has long ago come to an end. The town has shrunk to a lonely little mountain village. But the road is still there... a magnificent highway through the bush.

### Make a straight path for the Lord...

"Every valley filled in, every mountain and hill made low..."

It's a quote from the OT prophet Isaiah, chapter 40 (and perhaps you can hear a snippet from Handel's remarkable musical achievement, *Messiah*, as I say those words: Every valley shall be exalted!)

St Luke uses this quote to describe John the Baptists ministry. John came out of the bush, preaching and baptizing — for repentance. John was a wild bushie, in our Aussie vernacular. Unkempt. Smelling bad. With a rudimentary diet. And with a message that was burning a hole in his heart, and which he had to get out no matter what the personal cost.

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

Get ready for the Lord!!! Make a straight, direct path for Him. If there are valleys? Fill them in! If there are mountains? Level them out! Remove all barriers! Where things are crooked and

twisted? Make them straightforward and clear. Where things are rough, smooth them over. And do it now. Don't wait.

Turn your life around. This isn't just anyone coming! This is the LORD God Almighty Himself who is demanding right of way! This is the maker of heaven and earth. This is the one who alone sees the true state of your life – and mine. This is the one who alone is the one we must all eventually give an account too.

## Advent – a time of contrition

Advent asks us those kinds of questions. It's a time of getting ready for the Lord's arrival. So, it's a penitential time. It has a similar theme to Lent in this regard. A time to pause, reflect and consider — that's not so easy to do at this time of the year.

God's word is asking us today: What in your life and mine needs to be made straightforward and not convoluted? Are we walking on a crooked path in some area? Are we deviating from the direction we know God would have us take? What barriers are there between you and God? Chasms that you're tip-toeing around? People and relationships that you're avoiding because it feels like to 'go there' will result in you falling into a bottomless ravine?

What hole have you got yourself into? What mountains need moving? Where are the elephants in the room? What would God's Word have you address?

Let's make it really simple. How would the 10 commandments direct you at the present time?

John stands in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Here's Malachi, describing the nature of the one who is on the way:

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight — indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.*

*Malachi 3:1-4*

And from the book of Proverbs here are equally sobering words:

*Crooked minds are an abomination to the LORD, but those of blameless ways are his delight. Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished, but those who are righteous will escape.*

*Proverbs 11:20-21*

## Our problem with Advent – How can we get ready?

Advent asks all of us these types of questions because, even as we focus on Christ's coming as tiny baby, hovering in the background is the promise of his return, eventually, as the "King of Glory" who will put right what is wrong with this world. Who will settle accounts. Reset the cosmos, balance things so that justice is once again fulfilled.

How can we possibly get ready? When we have a tendency to deviate, to go "off road", regularly, in a disastrous fashion.

We make life complicated by placing our selfish desires first, or by interpreting the behavior of others from the standpoint of our own self-centred perspective.

Even deeper within us is the capacity to know the thing that pleases God, theoretically — but to wake up each morning loving the things that please our own selves — and doing the things that please us.

It's this essentially 'crooked' tendency of our human condition that results in the pitfalls and barriers that come between us and our neighbours — but more deeply, that cut us off from God himself. What Christianity has called our "sinful human nature" always seeks to construct a barrier between us and God. Not a road, but a barrier! Rather than keeping ourselves headed towards God, we regularly wander into the impenetrable country of our self-centred hearts. That wilderness is too thick for us. Too rugged. It traps us and bogs us down.

## God's Advent solution

It's interesting to me that in the four gospel accounts of Jesus' life, only two mention Jesus' birth — but all four of them report John the Baptist's message. What is it about John's preaching that's so important for understanding Jesus? Even more important than the details of his birth?

John's message was a call to repentance, but listen carefully and you can hear that the gospel — in a nutshell — is also preached by John.

There are even hints of the gospel in the song that John's Father, Zechariah, sang over him at his birth. It's preserved for us in Luke 1:68-79, and is sometimes used on this particular day of the church year. Here's what Zechariah sang over his Son, John the Baptist:

*"...for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

Here's Luke again, quoting Isaiah to describe John's ministry:

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all people shall see the salvation of God.'"*

Did you pick up the most important theme? Salvation is being announced! John's preaching is getting us ready for God's saving work.

The Gospel is this: God has built a road to you. Jesus travelled on it, when he came to us, through the wilderness of our human sin. He pushed through to where you were trapped. Cleared the way for you. It involved tremendous cost — he paid for it with his life.

John's call to repentance was announcing this. A straight and level road through to God was about to be constructed. God was coming into this world in the person of his son, Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is this: We couldn't build a road to God... so God built a road to us.

To become a 'follower' of Jesus does not mean we begin by building a road for ourselves so that we can travel on some upward journey to God. The first step is relinquish completely that whole construction project. Repentance is an 'I can't' experience, but always immediately followed by trust, trust that 'I can't, but God can!'

*The sanctified life* – Let's talk about the Life that God calls us to live... we can think of that life as a 'road' too... The life of discipleship...

The first step of repentance is to change your mind about your own ability to 'construct' a life that will earn God's grace and favor.

The second step is to trust that the reverse of that is true!

God has freely come towards you with his grace and favor!

Yes, there's was a barrier between you and God, but God has smashed through that barrier.

Our own self-righteousness always wants to get busy. "Thanks God, I've got it sorted from here!"

Remember that Mountain Highway in my opening illustration? Imagine travelling halfway along it and deciding, as magnificent and easy as it is, I'd rather step off it and go bush bashing! "I think this looks like a pretty good short cut Lord!... so thanks, I've got it from here!"

When Jesus sacrificed his life and paid for human sin, he constructed a road through to us. A road that we don't have to build. A road that it would be folly to walk away from!

The Christian life, the life that God longs for us to live, is first of all a life of daily trust. Daily stepping out onto the road that he has constructed. Trusting each day that the sacrifice he made is keeping that pathway open to God for ever. Trusting his words:

*I am the way, the truth and the life...*

*I came so that you might have life, and have it to the full!*

The daily Christian life, is a journey in which Jesus accompanies us. He's on the road with you. He's walking the road with you. When you stumble off, he's got hold of you and will make his way to you and lead you back.

God is always at work, through his sheer grace, continually, each day, using even what may first appear as barriers to our progress, to continually make us more like Jesus. Some of those barriers arise because of our sin. We dig holes and fall into them. In personal relationships, things go wrong and mountains arise. And I won't call them molehills. They are mountains when we're trying to traverse them. But in Jesus, God still moves mountains!

And he is also in the business of demolishing the hills and gullies of our daily struggle with sin.

I want conclude by speaking of two very practical ways that God keeps the road open for us.

Firstly, remember your baptism. This morning we've see baby Frederick Juers receive the gift of baptism. It's a living witness to our faith that God's does the work that gets us saved. The gift of faith comes through this sacrament which is not water only, but water used together with and by the command of Jesus. Frederick's parents and sponsors have promised to use the 'tool' of God's Word to keep telling Frederick the good news about Jesus' love for him. The Holy Spirit has promised to be at work through that powerful tool, drawing Erik deeper and deeper into Jesus, every day of his life.

The second practical way that God helps us walk the road of discipleship is through the gift of the sacrament of confession and absolution. What a powerful and practical tool!

In my marriage, it's the times when I say: "I was wrong, I'm sorry, please forgive me" and when my wife says: "I was wrong, I'm sorry and please forgive me" and when we freely forgive each other that the road of peace and loving harmony is opened up for us once again. At that point God is at work, demolishing our sin and rebuilding our relationship. In this way a road back to each other is reconstructed.

Those words: "I was wrong, please forgive me" are especially difficult when they involve the blind spots in my life. The things that I can't for the life of me see, until those who love me, point them out to me.

But make no mistake about it, during that struggle, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work, leading us and making us more and more like Jesus. God is at work, enabling us to share the gift of forgiveness that we first receive from Him, with our spouse, or child or other family member or work mate or neighbor.

So these are just two practical, sacramental ways that God helps us walk in a way which causes him to rejoice over us.

Dear friends, it's Advent! So, give up your own road construction efforts — and simply trust in God. You'll find a new road opening up before you. It's the wide smooth road of "I can't — but you can, Lord!" It's the road of faith!

Rejoice that on this road, God is directing your steps. He is helping you every step of the way, especially when you veer off the royal highway he has constructed. He pursues you, forgives and sets on the right pathway once again.

Rejoice that this construction work continues. Jesus constructed a road right to your door when he baptized you. Jesus is in the road maintenance business! He maintains the road each and every time you read His word, are healed by his forgiveness and share that healing with others.

That's the message of Advent. God has come for you, and God is with you today. Your way is clear. The Lord is on the journey with you, he knows the way — he *is* the way.

Amen.