

## **Road Work 2-17-02**

Luke 3:1-9

One blessing I get out of teaching at Cornerstone Christian Academy in Cottonwood is the drive back and forth. That is my time for Morning Prayer. A half-hour each way and I'm usually prayed up to start the day. I make a concerted effort to listen to the direction of the Holy Spirit as I pray. Coming home on Monday, the Lord drew my attention to the big earth moving equipment for the new highway. They are moving whole mountains of rock! I was reminded of Isaiah 40 from which John the Baptist quoted. Let's read it in Luke 3:1-9 (NIV)<sup>1</sup> *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--<sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.<sup>6</sup> And all mankind will see God's salvation."<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.<sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

John the Baptist is a cousin of Jesus. Luke's careful description of all who were in power at the time lead us to the conclusion that John is beginning his ministry in 26AD. Historians thought he had made a mistake in regard to Lysanias but recent archeological discoveries proved the Word of God is precisely accurate. Matthew describes the beginning of John's ministry as being in the wilderness of Judea. This area near the southern end of the Jordan where it empties into the Dead Sea is a rocky barren land. If you have seen pictures of Masaada you have an idea what the area is like. It was the same area as the home of the Qumran community of the Essenes. There is actually a record of a man named John who stayed with the Essenes near this same time. We have no way of knowing if it is the same John or not. The name John means the gift of Jehovah.

During the preceding 400 years there had been no prophets. Luke is careful to note exactly when a prophetic voice once again rang out to the people of Israel, and what a strange place for God to begin speaking again. Not the ideal place to try to reach the nation; the only large town nearby was Jericho. But as John quoted the words of Isaiah the people came – crowds gathered. You or I wouldn't consider it the most eloquent message but it drew them from Jerusalem, a day's walk on foot, to hear. What was it that drew them? Who wants to come see a man in the desert yelling, "Repent"? It is not the words themselves but the Spirit and power that accompany the words. The Apostle Paul told us his preaching was not with enticing

words of men's wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. God was in the words! I've tried to listen carefully to and watch powerful preachers and I agree with the apostle. The most eloquent and refined speakers aren't always the ones that reach my heart, but men of conviction that believe and live what they preach. The crowds came to hear John because he spoke with the conviction of a man who lived his message. His words came as demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

He wore camel's hair. Not a very desired material for clothing because of its coarse texture. When we look back at Elijah the prophet we find the same taste in clothing – camel's hair. Jesus told us John came in the spirit of Elijah. He ate what little he could gather. Locusts are actually not the insect but the nutritious bean pods of a tree in the Carob family. Take a moment to see this man in your mind's eye as he stands in this rocky wasteland, hair a wind-blown wild look, camel's hair covering. He has a few bee sting welts on his face and arms from gathering wild honey, and a booming voice calling out the words of the ancient prophets. But the crowds are moved with the impact of those words. He is declaring that the Messiah is coming and they had better get right with God. They needed a change of mind that results in a change of life. That is what "repent" means. Have a change of mind resulting in a change of actions. Then they would find forgiveness of sins. That was a message he could clearly see in the Psalms of King David.

Those who were ready to repent he led to the Jordan and dunked them in the water. It was a picture of dying to the old self and being raised a new person. You die to your thoughts and ways and come up a new person to live in God's thoughts and ways. Jews baptized Gentile converts but until John no Jew would baptize a Jew. In the Jewish mind they were descended from Abraham and didn't need to change. They wanted to obey the Law. But John is saying the letter of the Law is not good enough. The ceremonial washings they performed on themselves were not changing their heart. His action said, "You aren't acting according to the Spirit of the Law – you need to die and be a new person." Those who would humble themselves and admit their need would follow him into the water and be baptized. It was a declaration of their need to change their mind and heart and life. We are so much like those people. We think because we are in church and have the Bible we are just fine, but our lives don't declare us to be fine. We could use some baptisms. It is a declaration that we have been wrong and done things our own way and we need to change our mind about our ways. We go down into the water and declare, "I die to my ways" and as we come up, "I will live in the resurrected life of Jesus my Master." I wish we had a baptismal. It was a humbling public declaration that said, "I've been wrong! My thoughts and actions have been self and not the unconditional love of Jesus my Lord." We need some baptisms!

Let's focus now on the road work part of John's message: <sup>4</sup> *As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.*

The physical mountains were not moved nor were the physical valleys filled before Jesus came. He didn't come to change this physical world; He came to change hearts. The Messiah is coming, and John is warning them that their hearts needed

some roadwork before He could march in as their Lord. Jesus said that if we prayed and believed we could say to a mountain, "Be cast into the sea", and it would be done. Have you had to erase any mountains off your maps? Have you ever heard of any mountains flying into the sea? Then what was Jesus talking about? I think it is the same mountains that John was preaching about here in the Gospel of Luke, mountains and valleys in the heart of men. We know Jesus wants to come into our hearts and lovingly speak with us. John is saying we need to make a flat road for Jesus to enter in, get rid of any obstacles that would block Jesus from entering. It was an elaboration on his one word message, "Repent!"

What kind of mountains and valleys in our hearts might hinder the Lord from walking in and speaking to us? Pride may be one of the worst mountains. It was the mountain that took down Lucifer. Pride says, "My way is the only way." I know what's best and I don't need to listen to anyone else. Pride says, "Everyone is wrong and I'm right, and I don't care what anyone has to say about it." What a mountain pride can be! Right at this moment pride says, "This is about Mr. So and So, not me." Pride causes factions within the body of Christ just like mountains divide terrain. Pride declares, "My way is best and no one else is as right as me. Man is prone to error, that is, all men but me. That is why I can judge you and you and you, because I am doing it right." How very different the way of pride is from the way of Christ who humbled Himself and became a servant unto the death of the cross.

Mountains can be things we refuse to surrender to Christ. We know that if He were to speak clearly to us that thing or attitude would have to go. That is why we build the mountain where the road should be. We block His way into our hearts because we don't want to hear what He would say to us. Are there mountains in your heart that need to be leveled?

Mountains don't move easily. I've been watching the tractor drills as they drill holes into the hills between here and Cottonwood. They drill a hole every so many feet and put some TNT in it and the explosion cracks it all up. Before that the rock is so massive nothing can move it, like the mountains in our heart. But the Holy Spirit brings in His tractor drill and starts going to work. The drill bit of conviction drills the holes here and there and then He fills them with TNT – The New Testament. And the Word does the wonderful work breaking down the strong holds and everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. Suddenly the Word comes alive or the voice of the Spirit becomes clear and BOOM! That massive rock becomes a bunch of little boulders. The work isn't finished though. Those massive front loaders scoop it up and load up the dump trucks and use it for fill to level the valleys. You see, once that thing is broken up it still needs to be hauled off or it is a bunch of little issues.

Brothers and sisters, there are some mountains in the hearts of our fellowship. One more I must mention is the mountain of doubt. Here is what that mountain has voiced to me through some of you, "That person can't change. Paul, you have a big job in front of you, good luck!" What encouragement! No really! Because if it is impossible with man, then it is possible with God. He loves to do the impossible so

He gets all the glory. If it were up to me to change you, to move mountains it would be impossible, but what a relief, it is the job of the Almighty who has been changing hearts since the Garden of Eden! You may think this is a dead church but Ezekiel 37 was a valley full of dead bones and when the Spirit of God blew upon them they lived! Let the drill of conviction go to work. Let the Word of God speak to you. Are you in His Word every day? If not, did you consider that you might be avoiding it because you've grown fond of your mountain? Set the charges of the Word of God in your mountain and allow the rubble to be hauled away.

Why make the effort – it is so painful and so much work why not leave it? I'll tell you why not, the Lord is coming! Yes, His second coming is approaching, but His Presence wants to fill this sanctuary. I had a dream Monday night. Strangest dream I can recall. It was clear and vivid like dreams from the Lord often are. Daniel or Joseph weren't around to interpret it so I had to ask the Lord for the interpretation. Here is the dream. I had gathered and prayed with some brothers for the Sunday service. Someone came in, sat in the corner whining about certain people and I had the impression that they were under an evil influence. I told them sternly that the Lord Jesus died for those people so they had better watch their words. I went into the sanctuary and it was past time to get started. No one was there! I opened the door to look outside and here came a stream of people. As I knelt by a young man in wheelchair and shared with him, the sanctuary almost completely filled. There were no musicians so I was concerned but then the lights went off. A spotlight hit the aisle and suddenly a procession of men, maybe 12 or more, two abreast in red coats were there with trumpets blaring.

It was a few days later when I began to understand what it meant. There is not much happening now because there is a complaining spirit causing factions and unrest. If we as a church will say, "Jesus died for that person so I WILL love them", that spirit will have no power here! Memorize the Apostle Paul's words. Galatians 5:6b (NIV) *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* We may be a little behind schedule, but look out in the streets; they're coming! If we will first love one another and then have a heart to minister to the hurting and hear their pain, this church will fill up. It won't be with perfect people but people that need love. The spotlight will be on the clear trumpet call of the Gospel resounding with the love of God proclaimed by those who have on the red coats, in other words, covered in the blood of Jesus! The trumpets declare the King is coming. The Presence of the Lord wants to fill our lives! If the Lord is going to fill Wayside with His Presence in a way that brings people to Jesus, the mountains must first come down and the valleys must be filled in us. Do you believe it?

Now what about the valleys? The valleys are the patterns and habits we slip into, the gossip, the talking about others secretly, and the politicking that goes on. People that are looking for a place to worship will run from that. Then there are the valleys of thought that are places our minds shouldn't go. If you are wondering whether or not to say something – don't say it! When in doubt, don't voice it! Habits are hard things to break. I often pray that God will fill the valleys in my mind and pave over them. Sometimes I think I have a valley filled and it washes back out. We have to change the way we think so that we have the mind of Christ. We need

to be in God's Word daily to let it wash our minds. That is why our Sunday morning Bible Study is going to be on the Mind of Christ.

Remember this whole process is about making a highway for the Presence of the Lord to enter in here so you and I can change, and if we change, Wayside changes. Build the highway and He will come, and if the King is here His servants will fill this place. The seekers will come because they see the lives of the servants of God. Lives will be changed and God will be glorified.  
Luke 3:6 (NIV)<sup>6</sup> *And all mankind will see God's salvation.*"

I know that is what you want, and it is what I want, and it is what Jesus wants. So in the name of Jesus – don't speak against your brother for whom Christ died. Let's ask the Holy Spirit right now to drill and set the charges in us all. Do you agree?

Luke 3:7-8 (NIV)<sup>7</sup> *John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*

Matthew says that John said this to the religious leaders. They came to observe what was drawing the crowds away from them and into the wilderness. Then when they see this wild man John, they stay and try to figure out why the people are drawn. John addresses those leaders in these verses. One group, the Sadducees, had control of the temple because of a power deal with the Romans. They would stand at the gates of the Temple and find reasons to not let the people in. If you had a wart on your nose, or a pimple on your chin, or any little deformity they would forbid your entrance. May the Lord help us not to fall into that error here! Bring that handicapped boy in, physically or spiritually handicapped! Let the children come. We need to find reasons to include not exclude. Our sign on the street will say, "All are welcome".

The other group, the Pharisees, would demand the people do all kinds of things not required by the Law. They majored on the minors and minored on the majors. Has that been a problem with the church today! Sound the trumpet! The King is coming – let us focus on Him. If minor issue upsets you remember it is minor! Major on the major ones – we are purchased from the bondage of sin by our Lord Jesus Christ. That is a major one. We are to love one another! That is a major one! Music is wonderful but the style is minor. Don the red coat and sound the trumpet!

The humblest among us will yield and the prideful will refuse to bend,  
but the Sovereign Lord of heaven will have His way in the end!

Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God and He will lift you up.

John told those religious leaders, "Let me see your change of mind set by the good results of your actions." Don't think just because you are related to Abraham you have an in with God. God can take a stone and make it a son of Abraham. Those leaders were familiar with Jeremiah's prophecy (chapter 31) about the coming New

Covenant that would take hearts of stone and change them to hearts of flesh and write on them the Law. The Law came on a tablet of stone, but what is needed is a heart that can sense the Spirit of the Law. The hard hearts in Israel could become sons of Abraham. The Gentile Greeks could become sons of Abraham through faith, as he said earlier, "All mankind will see it!" Will Sedona see our stony hearts turned to hearts of flesh by a miracle of the Holy Spirit? I'm not saying be born again a second time. I am saying if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The Apostle John said that to believers. Will we start there?

Luke 3:9 (NIV)<sup>9</sup> *The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."*

John is saying things are about to change. I believe things are about to change here. Not because you called me but because God has ordained that this is the time for the prayers of many to be answered. The right pastor is not your answer, the right heart of the people surrendered to Jesus is! If there is no fruit, no Gal 5:22b,23 (NIV) "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control*" then the ax will fall. Yes, this verse is about the end of the sacrificial system of the law and Levitical priesthood, but it is just as applicable to any fruitless system on the Highway of God in our hearts. If the mountains don't go we will be fruitless.

Let me add verse 10, which was not in our reading. Luke 3:10 (NIV)<sup>10</sup> "*What should we do then?*" *the crowd asked.* I pray you are asking the same. Have you let the drill of conviction drill the holes? Here is the TNT: Galatians 5:6b (NIV) *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.* Level the mountains and fill the valleys! The King is coming! Will He find a smooth highway in your heart? Yesterday is past – will you with the Apostle Paul forget those things that are behind and press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus? Will you let those charges of the Word bust up the ground of your heart and allow the rubble to be hauled away? We know it is God's will that the Holy Spirit make a straight and level road for the King of kings to march into your heart afresh, to speak to you as clearly as the day you first surrendered to Him, if you will let Him.

I need to understand if you have heard the Holy Spirit this morning or if you have just heard me – a man. I need to see the hands of those who need to be baptized, who need some mountains moved. I need to see who is willing to confess they have built up walls against their brothers, who have in their pride judged their brother as not as worthy as them. There are people outside waiting to come in, waiting until the feuds are over, waiting until we decide we will love like Jesus did, laying down our lives. They are waiting to see if we will be Christ-like, silent lambs to the slaughter – because we love Him who demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners – He was willing to die for us.