

Preparing the Way Matthew 3:1-12

How do you get from Natchez to Nashville? For the earliest Americans, the answer was obvious – the Old Natchez Trace. Before the Spanish brought horses to these shores, the people in North America had to get from place to place on foot – they didn't even have the llamas that South Americans used as beasts of burden. So, a narrow footpath, or trace, was just fine for migrating wildlife and for pedestrians who could ford streams and clamber up and down loess hills.

The new Natchez Trace parkway can still be a good route, depending on your agenda. It's perfect for bicycles – there are no big trucks, and very little traffic of any kind down this way. Yesterday morning I rode 11 miles and only one car passed me – moving all the way into the other lane, as is the rule. As a national park, it's a great place for sightseers or folks not in too big a hurry to observe the 50 mph speed limit. It's also a good route if you're more interested in saving gas than time – I drove back from a Synod meeting in Franklin on the Trace several years ago, and got over 30 mpg in my Grand Marquis!

But if you are a trucker with a load to deliver, you'll have to take the Interstate, either through Memphis or through Birmingham – no commercial hauling is allowed on the Trace. And if you need to get to Nashville in less than 8 hours, you'll have to find another route – you might even want to fly. In short, the route you choose depends on who you are. And the way you build a road will be determined by who is going to be travelling on it – pedestrians or cyclists, sightseers or truckers.

And that's the question that both Isaiah and John the Baptist present to us: Who or what do you want travelling on the road into your heart and mind? If you're looking for human love or companionship, you might look up the road that leads to a bar or a computer dating site. If you're looking for financial prosperity, the road might lead through a workplace, or increasingly these days a home office, and it might be paved with long hours and late nights.

Or maybe you are looking to science and technology to deliver health or efficiency to your door. Maybe you are looking to government to make our society safer or more just. Maybe you just want to be entertained or distracted, to get your mind off of all the tremendous problems we see all around us. We might place our trust in any of these things, and we might prepare the way for each of them to come into our lives in different ways. But there's no guarantee that any of them will choose to visit us, or that they will bring the blessings we seek from them.

Well, both Isaiah and John the Baptist would have us look in a different direction. In fact, according to both Matthew and Isaiah, that was John's main mission, to prepare the way of the Lord, to build a highway on which God Himself can travel. For as Isaiah points out, God should be the visitor we want most to see. And that's because God is more worthy of our worship and praise than anyone or anything else we can imagine.

What about government or politics? Isaiah reminds us that God is the One Who comes with might, ruling with a strong hand, and rewarding those who are faithful to Him. God is the One, Isaiah says, Who reduces all human princes, or rulers, to nothing.

What about science and technology? One reason that people made statues of their gods in Isaiah's time was to show off their craftsmanship, their skill at making things. But Isaiah reminds us that God is the ultimate Creator, the One Who stretched out the heavens the way we might stretch a curtain across a window. God is the great scientist, the One Who set billions and billions of stars on fire by

compressing hydrogen gas with the force of gravity and scattering these immense fusion reactors across unimaginable distances.

What about wealth? The people of Isaiah's time bowed down before images of gold and silver, valuing those materials as greatly as we do. But no matter how precious our possessions may be to us, we control them for only a few years. As Isaiah points out, all of us will one day pass away as the grass dries up in the heat of a Mississippi summer. How much better, then, to place our trust in the Word of the Lord, which abides forever? How much better to cast aside all our idols and make a way for the One True God to come into our hearts?

But why did John need to prepare a highway for God to visit His people? After all, many of us during this COVID crisis have found that roads are a bit overrated. We've rediscovered the convenience of shopping locally, recognizing that we don't really need to go to Jackson or even to Vicksburg for most of the basics. And many Americans across the country have even been encouraged or even required to work from home, thus avoiding the hassles of daily commutes. So, even though it's relatively easy these days to get out of town, fewer of us are doing so – we're content to stay close to home. After all, you only need a road to get something that you don't have where you already are.

And that, by the way, is why the bison and deer first wound their way through the forests of Mississippi to create the Natchez Trace – during different seasons of the year, they wanted to have access to the salt licks in the Nashville area, but then be able to move to the lush browsing and grazing grounds here in Southwest Mississippi. They didn't have everything they needed in one place all the time, so they made a path – and the hunters followed right along after them, blazing the trail as they went.

So, where did Isaiah say John would need to prepare a way for God? In the wilderness, in the desert, in a place of barrenness, in a place that cannot sustain life. In short, John needed to prepare the way of the Lord because of our great need for Him to come to us, just as the great as the need of the desert for the life-giving rain.

So, if we want God to visit us, we don't just need to be looking down the right road, looking to God instead of all the false idols that clamor for our attention. No, we must also realize the desperate condition of our situation, and thus our great need for Him to come down that road.

Now, that shouldn't have been hard for the people of Isaiah's day to understand – they were surrounded by powerful political enemies and their cities were soon to be invaded by the Assyrians. And the people of John's day were in a similar situation, with the Roman Empire controlling so many facets of their everyday lives. They knew they were in way over their heads and needed God's help just to survive.

And given today's headlines, shouldn't we modern Americans have come to the same conclusion? Let's see: our two major political parties continue to tear at each other's throats, causing the Federal government to grind to a halt. Violent protests are breaking out in major cities across the country. Oh, and there's that strange new coronavirus, which some people have without even knowing it, while others have to be put in the ICU. The wheels are coming off of every aspect of our culture at the same time – political, social, and technological. So, if there's any group of people who should be able to realize their need for God, it should be us modern Americans.

But just as so many of us continue to look in so many different directions for answers, others remain far too complacent, far too confident in our own abilities. Instead of allowing the alarming circumstances of our world, and of our individual lives to drive us to our knees, crying out for God to help us, some folks continue to believe that we can handle this, that our own knowledge or power or

wealth is sufficient to solve whatever problems may come our way. But when folks deny their need for God, well, they won't be very anxious for Him to come for a visit, will they?

But there's a third problem, a third reason that John needed to come and prepare the way of the Lord. For we don't just need the right God to come down the road, and we don't just need to realize our great need for God to come down that road. That road also needs to be cleared of any potential obstructions, of any obstacles that might stand in God's way.

For, come to think of it, avoiding obstacles was the reason the Natchez Trace ran the way it did. The bison and deer that first created the trail weren't the best of engineers, so they just followed the ridgelines that already existed, choosing a southwestern path that kept them from having to cross the Big Black River. Instead of trying to improve the route, they just travelled in the only way they could.

So, what obstacles might need to be removed from God's pathway into our lives? Isaiah talked in poetic terms about mountains and hills that needed to be leveled out. In his more direct fashion, John pointed to the people of his day who had high opinions of themselves, people whose pride was too lofty. Some of them put a whole lot of stock in the fact that they were biological descendants of Abraham. Others, like the Pharisees, were proud of the fact that they tried to keep the ethical requirements of the Law of God down to the smallest detail. Still others, like the Sadducees, thought that their scrupulous attention to all the ceremonial duties of the Law would earn them favor in God's sight. But instead of recognizing them as the lofty, important, valuable people they all considered themselves to be, John saw them as nothing more than a bunch of self-centered snakes. Their pride formed a massive barrier to any sort of real relationship they could have with God.

So, what about us, American Christians? Do we share that sort of pride? Are some of us proud that we grew up in the church? Maybe we're proud of our Presbyterian heritage, which prizes decency and order and which cherishes the precision and truth of our Westminster Confession of Faith. Or maybe we look down on those whose poor choices have led them in all sorts of self-destructive directions, bless their hearts. Moreover, could it be that our pride has also led us into complacency, not just erecting a roadblock against God becoming more real to us, but denying our need for any spiritual improvement at all?

But of course it wasn't just high places that Isaiah said needed to be knocked down. He also said that valleys needed to be exalted, that low places needed to be lifted up. So, if the high places correspond to proud, self-confident people, to whom might the valleys point? Maybe those who have abandoned all the other options and are looking to God alone to save them. Maybe those who, far from being complacent, confess their need for God to solve the problems that threaten to overwhelm them. Maybe those who, far from being proud of their achievements, are willing to do what so many of John's listeners did – to confess their sins and admit their need of radical transformation, their need to be washed clean by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

For that is the best news of all, the good news that both Isaiah and John preached. For neither one of them suggested that we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, solving our sin problems on our own. For the fact is that we can't. Instead, like those earliest Americans, we are still blundering through the wilderness, having to stick to the winding ridgetops. We have no way to move mountains, no way to build bridges, no way to clear away the obstacles that stand between us and God.

But the good news is that God is the great road-builder – He can make a way over the tallest bluffs and the deepest gullies. In His justice He is able to cut the mountains of pride down to size. In His wisdom, He can straighten out even the most twisted of our self-deceptions and rationalizations. As John said, He would burn up all the chaff, all that is out of accord with His good and perfect will. He will

cut down every tree that fails to produce fruit for Him, the fruit of a life lived in gratitude for His grace, a life lived only for His glory.

But at the same time, God is able, in His mercy, to raise up the lowliest sinner, building bridges to allow us to cruise along above all our persecutions, all our temptations, above everything that stands between us and Him. For God promises to gather all His wheat into His garner, into His barn, saving all those who trust in Christ from the judgment that all our sins deserve.

Yes, the good news for those of us who know we need a Savior and for those who are looking to the One True God to save us, the good news is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The good news is that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross for all who trust in Him, Jesus has proven Himself to be our good shepherd, the One Whom Isaiah said would feed his flock, gathering up and carrying His lambs. For by His perfect sacrifice has God pardoned all our iniquities, ending our war with sin and death once and for all. In Christ, God has made a way for us to live with Him forever.

So, let's follow our Good Shepherd on the road that He has built. Let's cast aside all our idolatry, all our complacency, and all our pride, and stick close to the One Who laid down His life for us.