

December 9, 2019  
Second Sunday in Advent

**Malachi 3:1-10**  
**Luke 3:1-6**

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### **John the Bulldozer**

*See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come. ... The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming ... 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. – Malachi 3:1-3a*



The gospel reading for this second Sunday of Advent is from Luke, chapter 3. This takes place at the start of Jesus' public ministry. As promised, God has sent a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. John is very much the kind of messenger that the prophet Malachi described. He's like a refiner's fire or fullers' soap, Luke is careful to ground his story in geography and history. John came, Luke says, to a particular family at a specific time. Listen to God's word from Luke, chapter 3, beginning at verse 1:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*

*“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.’”*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together:

You call us to prepare, Savior God -- to make a way for your coming, to make a people ready to welcome and receive you. You ask to turn from our sin and sorrow and prepare. Make us alert to your coming. Make us more holy, make us more true. Make us like Jesus, in his name we pray. Amen.

My family is trying to unplug the Christmas Machine. Do you know what I mean? We are fed up with the materialism and the stress that surrounds the holiday season. This year we are going low impact: presents for the children only, no cards. We are giving to the church and charities, rather than each other. I'll let you know how it goes. So far we like the new approach. Right now we feel like a burden has been lifted off our shoulders.



The best part, so far, is what happened on Black Friday. Instead of getting to the mall at 4:00 AM to grab our Christmas gifts on sale, this year on the day after Thanksgiving, we went to the zoo. It was great; we practically had the animals to ourselves! Apparently nobody goes to the zoo on Black Friday. Louisa loved the petting zoo. This guy's name is Benson.



Tawes met one of his ancient ancestors.

I learned something at the zoo about giraffes and what happens when a female giraffe, called a cow, gives birth. After a pregnancy that lasts 15 months (yikes!) giraffes give birth standing up. With the last contraction, the calf drops to the ground, a distance of about 10 feet. That's a long way to fall. The calf usually lands on his back. What a way to come into the world, right?

After falling to the ground, the newborn calf rolls over on its stomach with its legs tucked under. At this point the mother giraffe does something odd and disconcerting. For a few minutes she nuzzles her baby gently, then she kicks the newborn calf head over heels and sends it sprawling. Talk about tough love! If the calf doesn't immediately stand up on its wobbly knees, she kicks it again and again until it stands.

Finally, the little calf, who is not so little after all, weighing in at around 220 pounds, stands for the first time, snacks on mother's milk, and quickly joins the herd.



It's not that the mother giraffe is being cruel to her calf. Quite the opposite! Giraffe mothers instinctively know that lions, leopards, hyenas and wild dogs would love to make a meal of her baby. She has to get her baby up on its feet as quickly as possible. She must keep it within the safety and shelter of the herd. Kicking her calf is her way of protecting it from danger.

Do you feel like you've been kicked around this week? No sooner than you got to your feet, something, someone knocked you down again? Me too. One of my dear friends died suddenly this week. I did not even have the chance to tell him how much his faith and friendship meant to me. It's a terrible loss.

And fussy prophets like Malachi and John the Baptist preaching at me about repentance feels...well, harsh. Frankly, I prefer Isaiah's, "Comfort, comfort my people...speak tenderly to Jerusalem"<sup>i</sup> to the refiner's fire or fullers' soap. But here, on the second Sunday of Advent, ready or not, we meet them, these prophets. Malachi was a prophet from Israel's 6<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Ezra, Nehemiah and the restoration of Jerusalem. It was a rough and rugged time in Israel's history.

Malachi declared that God's messenger was coming to prepare a way for the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah said that he would "*make a highway for our God ...every valley should be lifted up, and the rough places become a plain.*"<sup>ii</sup> That is no gentle work. One image that comes to mind when I picture John, God's messenger, is a piece of heavy machinery, like a bulldozer.

That was John's message. It was strong, muscular. He's not out there in the wilderness around the Jordan wowing the crowds with cute stories and cheap tricks. He meant business. John spoke truth to power and he paid the ultimate price for it. His job, his only job was to prepare the way for the Messiah, not only on the ground, but more importantly, in the hearts of people. John has to push away all the garbage and flotsam in our lives to make room, a pure space for the Savior's coming.

Most of us aren't too keen on that idea. We prefer that our teachers and prophets help us to do the things we want. We want them to comfort our sorrows and bless our goals. "Make us strong and successful!" We say, but John's not about that. You've got to give him credit for his focus. He is all and only about making us ready for the Savior.

John wants God's people to become a highway, a pathway, a sparkling new road for the Spirit to use to deliver the Savior's message to the whole world.

John is here to level out the fear. He wants to tamp down the confusion that has hijacked us and remove all the unholy stuff that clutters our lives and drowns out the Spirit's voice. His message is simple: "Repent and believe the good news." He'll blow up a mountains if need be. Getting ready to receive the Messiah requires major surgery for some of us. What I need most is a swift kick in the pants. Maybe you do too.

There's a story. It sounds incredible, but I heard it from a United Methodist minister of good reputation. It happened that a police officers was driving down a section of interstate one day. He heard an emergency alert over his radio. The address was close, so he radioed that he would take it. Flipping on his flashing lights and siren he suddenly realized that the off-ramp he needed to take to reach the emergency was closed due to construction. He made an instant decision. He saw a worker on a bulldozer and drove up close, jumped out of his car, and yelled to the worker that he needed to use the off- ramp. The worker yelled, "Follow me." Then the bulldozer scooped up a huge load of dirt, set it down, instantly creating a rough but passable way for the officer's patrol car to exit.

Three more blocks and he arrived at the designated address. There was a woman in the yard with a child in her arms. The baby was gasping and turning blue. Obviously he had swallowed something. The officer grabbed the child, flipped him over and performed the Heimlich. A button flew out of his mouth. The boy gulped air, coughed and began to breathe normally again. The officer got back into his car feeling like he'd done a good day's work.

Next morning he was traveling that same stretch of highway. He saw the construction workers and decided to stop to thank the operator who had helped the day before. But as soon as the driver saw the police car, he jumped off the bulldozer and started running in the officer's direction. When the man got close, he blurted out, "The baby you saved yesterday, that was my son!"

Sometimes a bulldozer is just what we need to prepare a way. Make your pathway straight and the rough places plain!

Sometimes it takes a bulldozer. Sometimes revision is not gentle or sweet. When you think that you've been metaphorically kicked once too often, think of the giraffe mom and her baby. Don't give up; stay with the herd. Presence is most important in the times when we are tender and vulnerable.

Listen to John and to Malachi. The Savior has come and he is coming again. He needs his people to be like a well-tended ground, purged of debris and excesses of all kinds. Malachi tells us quite clearly to bring our tithe, the ten percent that the Bible tells us to give to God. It's important, especially at this time of year, when we are preparing to spend so much on ourselves and each other. It's critical to remember our Source and give freely to God.

John the Baptist, John the Bulldozer is what we need, at least he's what I need. He isn't sweet or comforting, but he does the thing God requires. He made a way, he continues to make a way for Jesus – in us. Advent is a time set aside each year for us to take a long, hard look at ourselves, to kick our fears to the curb and get about the hard work of constructing a way for Jesus Christ – here in this place.

So let's commit to making a way for others. Let's prepare the way by removing obstacles from the poor, bringing a word of hope to our neighbors in need, especially those who are experiencing homelessness, illness, and those who are in prison – maybe they have broken the law but they are still children of God.

Also we need to prepare the way by educating ourselves in the scriptures. Adult education and adult Bible study; these are so important. We need to prepare by teaching the children, giving them a sound biblical foundation, so that they will be ready when false teachers say: "this is Biblical," and "that is in the Bible." Our children need to know in advance what is true. There will be more and more false teachers before Christ's return. We need to be ready.

We can prepare the way by strengthening our fellowship. Those who are out on the edges of the congregation are the most vulnerable. So every one of us who is meaningfully involved in the church needs to invite someone to take part. There's plenty of opportunity. Did you see Woods' *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*? Then you saw how a handful of willing volunteers can transform lives and a whole community.

Finally, remember to listen for God's word coming from the rough and unpolished people, the harsh places and the tough situations. Sometimes that's where our help is found. Sometimes grace rains blessings on us and sometimes grace gives us a kick in the pants.

So where are the places in your life that need leveling to make way for the Messiah? What about our church and community? The world?

Are there potholes and divots in your faithfulness that need to be filled? What needs to change for Christ to make his home in you? In me? And what if he comes today? Will we be ready? Before he comes we need John the Bulldozer to explode our self-centeredness, prejudice and fear. With the Spirit's help we can fill in the hollow valleys of our cynicism and apathy and straighten out the twisty, curvy roads that eat our energy and waste our time.

Imagine what that would be like for you? What would it smell like? Not like asphalt; more like a breath of fresh air!

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<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 40:1

<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 40:3-4