

Wilderness Roadwork, a sermon in response to Malachi 3:1-4 and Luke 3:1-6 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, December 9, 2018. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

In May of 1804, an expedition set out from St. Louis under the leadership of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. They had a commission from President Thomas Jefferson to secure the western boundaries of the United States after the Louisiana Purchase, by mapping the newly acquired areas, and laying claim on the lands west of the Purchase – all the way to the Pacific Ocean. It was a long and difficult journey that almost failed several times. ... Before they could eventually reach their goal, Lewis and Clark met and developed trading relationships with over 20 Indian nations – and it was only with *their* help that the expedition avoided getting lost in the Rocky Mountains – ... or starving to death. *Other* native groups were less hospitable, which threatened to end the expedition in violence. Lewis and Clark probably would never have completed the journey at all if they had not been joined by the young Shoshone woman Sacagawea, who served as a translator, guide, and ambassador. +++ Lewis and Clark had **no road** to follow – their **paths were not straight** – the **valleys were deep** ... and the **mountains were high** – and they had **lots** of rough terrain to cross. +++ They finally made it to the Pacific Ocean – at the mouth of the Columbia River, at what is now the border between Washington and Oregon – in November, 1805 – a **year and a half** after they had set out from St. Louis... +++ **A year and a half**. +++ +++ ... **Now**, (if you have another driver with you), it takes 31 hours by car from St. Louis to the site where the expedition found the Pacific Ocean. That means you could leave after breakfast and get there in time for dinner tomorrow. +++ **The difference**, of course, is that engineers and laborers have **prepared the way** for us with **WILDERNESS ROADWORK**. They made the **paths straight** with interstate highways, made **mountains and hills low** with tunnels and bridges, and made the **rough ways smooth** with pavement. There are gas stations and restaurants lined up along the entire route to keep us fueled up and supplied with food ((and coffee)) ... So:: This task that was **almost impossible** even for the most skilled outdoorsmen – is now attainable for **everyone**. +++ If we just pay attention – keep ourselves on the road – if we follow the free maps that are easy to come by... – and stay alert – we’re going to get there.

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During this Advent Season, today’s scripture readings tell us how God does this kind of Wilderness Roadwork for **US** as we prepare for Christ to enter the world again. +++ Let’s start with a little background:: ... The prophet Malachi writes when the people of Judah have recently returned home to Jerusalem after their 70-year exile in Babylon. – They’ve rededicated their Temple, and priests have resumed their central role in public life. +++ On the surface, that makes it seem like everything is falling back into place nicely... And, maybe they **have** started to overcome **some** of the **initial** challenges:: – Where will people live as we rebuild homes destroyed a generation ago? How do we produce enough food for everyone with these neglected fields? ... But there are **deeper** problems that are **nowhere near** solved:: How do we regain our religious autonomy to worship God as we see fit without getting in trouble with the **new** Empire that defeated Babylon: the Persians? They allowed us to come back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple – but how long will that last? +++ Who should be in control now, without a king? +++ How do we rebuild a sense of community and shared purpose? +++ What should even be their first priority for rebuilding, with the walls of **both** the Temple **and** the city of Jerusalem still in shambles. +++ And the list goes on... +++ These challenges **alone** were enough to make the people feel lost:: “What should we **do** when there is no road – or a map to show us the way?” +++ But as bad as that all sounds, – it hardly scratches the surface of everything that’s going on. +++ During their time away, it seems, the people have forgotten their **covenant** with God – and now they live without regard for the law – or for righteousness. Everyone does things their own way. Worship practices have fallen into disarray and people are intermarrying with the strangers who had moved onto the land during their absence – something forbidden by God. +++ They are **home**, but in many ways the people are still **as lost as ever**. +++ Malachi is especially concerned about the priesthood. Israel needs **righteous leadership**, but the priests have become so corrupted that God declares through Malachi that “**any blessings** made by the priests will be curses instead.”

But instead of *realizing* their shortcomings – looking honestly at their faults – and **repenting** of them... the people instead have the audacity to ask why **God** isn’t doing more for **them**. And so, in the verse just before today’s reading, Malachi protests:: ““You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, ‘**How** have **we** wearied him?’... By

saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’” +++ +++ Finally, as we get to today’s reading, Malachi has had enough, in essence saying, “So you want to know where the God of justice is? **Be careful what you ask for – because the Lord IS coming – whether you are ready or not!!** You’d **better** learn the error of your ways – you need to REPENT!” +++ And you will have a chance, Malachi promises. – Just before the Lord appears among you – a messenger will come to prepare the way. But don’t mistake this for a feel-good story of a herald just coming to announce the good news the Lord’s arrival to a grateful world – NO – Malachi says this messenger will be tough: “like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap – he will purify you and refine you, until you are **READY** to present offerings to the Lord **in righteousness**.” +++ +++ IF you **listen** to this messenger – if you follow him through the **wilderness** – he will **build a road** for you – and show you how to **repent** – how to **really prepare** for the arrival of the Lord. +++

And that’s how the Old Testament ends, after just a few more verses:: “A messenger will come – and then the Lord will appear.” +++ You only have to turn the page to find the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, in Matthew... +++ But the world isn’t ready to receive him yet – we still need that messenger to “*whip us into shape*” – to do the **Roadwork** that will help us through the **Wilderness**. +++ +++ And that brings us to this morning’s gospel reading... +++ Jesus Christ was born about thirty years ago. He is on the verge of starting his public ministry – when, Luke tells us, “the **word of God came to John... in the wilderness**. He went into all the regions around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of **repentance for the forgiveness of sins**.” +++ This was something new:: it’s not all about the whole community – God’s People in general, or Jerusalem, or the Temple. This baptism of repentance is much more personal than that:: **YOU** can be cleansed in the waters of baptism – when you repent of **YOUR** sins. +++ Each person can – and must – prepare for the coming Lord in our own way. +++ +++

NOW – don’t get the wrong idea about John the Baptizer. He’s not just some master of ceremonies announcing the arrival of our Lord and Savior onto the scene. +++ **He was tough** – just as Malachi had promised the messenger **would** be. +++ The people still had a lot of hard work to do before they were ready for Jesus... +++ So, just **after** our reading, John swings into action, saying to the gathering crowds, “You brood of vipers! ... Bear fruits **worthy** of repentance.” +++ And he wouldn’t let them claim to be worthy just because they were Jews:: “Do not **begin** to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’” John scolds, “for I tell you, God is able **from these stones** to raise up children to Abraham.” +++ And so the crowds ask him, “What then **should** we do?” +++ **And that’s when John begins laying the foundations for what Jesus Christ will soon demand of us all: What should you do??** “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” +++ Foundations of the Gospel:: **Love your neighbor**... The last shall be first... Take up your cross... +++

John the Baptizer – building a nice, straight, path for us... to escape our past lives – to repent – and to make our way to Christ. +++ **Luke** quotes Isaiah here, instead of Malachi, but the message is the same. +++ Through the messenger, God will build a road for us – a highway from the wilderness:: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>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; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

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Today – during this Advent season – Jesus Christ is once again on the verge of coming into this world (where he has *always been*...)... And, John has something to say to **us** before **we** are ready to receive him. +++ Repent... Stop confusing evil with goodness... Listen for the Word of God through Christ with fresh ears – and a fresh heart... Love deeply... +++ The Good News is that the Road from the Wilderness has already been laid out for you – take it – and be led to your Savior.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen