**Matthew 3:1-12**

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, **2**  “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” **3** For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’ ” **4** Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. **5** Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, **6** and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. **7** But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. **9** And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. **10** Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **11**  “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **12** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

**“Christ’s Path Plowed Out”**

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Roads are important and we especially know it this time of the year. If it were not for the highway system holiday travels would be much, much closer to home. Now it is one thing to take on a massive project as they did in 1926 to build our major roadways. However, it takes just as much, if not more, effort to maintain the roads we use. Whether it be your personal driveway, the secondary roads in our county, and the primary roads throughout this nation. Without the proper care, neglect or poor maintenance results in faster deterioration and eventual failure of any road.

The ministry of John was one of road preparation. Several centuries had passed and God’s people. They did not preserve what had been laid down by the prophets. Much rebellion and idolatry by Israel had overgrowth and even damaged the way of Christ. If the spiritual landscape for John the Baptizer was bad, his jaw would drop over what we face today. In America alone, there is an ever-increasing plurality of false religions attracting people. We have a growing segment in society that wants to practice no religion. Finally, even in Christian churches, we find central teachings of the faith denied like the authority of God’s Word, justification, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Advent always pulls out John the Baptizer and again puts before the Church what still needs attention. Plow out Christ’s path!

1. **As with any plowing of roads in winter, the initial impact has a great deal of force.**
2. John first came with a message that packed a punch right from the start, “Repent.”

* These were not Gentiles coming out to the Jordan river, but God’s people Israel!
* Repent was more than just being sorry over sins, but meant a change of thinking among sinners.
* To make the claim that they had already repented or needed no repentance accomplished nothing.
* The key to repent came from faith in this, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
* Forgiveness had come! Not by a dead way of man, but to trust God’s grace given for all in Christ.

1. As Lent is before Easter, so Advent is the time to refresh us before Christmas.

* There are no, “Fa La La La La’s” without first looking at the need to repent.
* A lump of coal is what we deserve for every Sunday the confession is the same, “We have sinned in thought, word, and deed.”
* Honesty toward repentance goes beyond the heart, but has evidence for those baptized by John who “confessed their sins.”
* It means rather than becoming defensive or confrontational over sinful failings that we confess to God and our neighbor, “I am sorry.”
* Advent gets rid of the hypocrisy during the holidays. Our way of life as Christians is to repent and this call of God’s grace goes out to the world.

1. **A road maintained by plowing opens up freedom, which is a benefit to everyone.**
2. Along with the preaching of John also came His baptizing in the wilderness.

* Ritual cleansing was a common necessity for Jews, since ceremonial law had all kinds of washing.
* Yet, the baptizing by John was a one-time washing where God worked forgiveness.
* Repentance welcomed a new life that God alone worked as a gift for sinners.
* What John began at the Jordan has now expanded to be a benefit of life now for all by Christian baptism.

1. If we are to maintain life in Christ, Advent leads us to treasure our baptism.

* John came in the glory of God being the last prophet, but Jesus was the glory of God for, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”
* God’s grace has come upon us greater than John to the Jews, but by the preaching and baptism of Jesus for all nations.
* This watery work of the Holy Spirit has opened up all the benefits of Jesus life, death, and resurrection with freedom for you.
* Advent turns us from discord to harmony in baptism where, “…together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1. **The final outcome of roads is simply for the purpose of travel.**
2. John saw no value with making preparation for Christ to be an empty way.

* He knew the result, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”
* Of course, the problem is that the Pharisees and Sadducees already saw their lives as fruitful.
* This is why we hear a sever judgment, “Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”
* The good of anyone is empty apart from faith in God working all good for sinners.

1. If baptism opened the way by grace, how do we still as sinners produce good fruit?

* Being busy and productive by our own standards misses the point.
* If God alone calls and saves sinners, then it must be His Spirit alone that is at work in us.
* Good fruit is not an effort produced by our willpower or strength, but a miracle of God’s good Sprit upon our lives.
* Better than being a decent person, is to believe that, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control…” (Gal 5:22-23)

Advent opens up the way of God’s mission to the world. It is now the mission of Christ’s Church that comes to baptize and teach in His Name. John the Baptizer plowed out Christ’s path preparing many to receive the promised Savior. Advent tells us it does not start with a world destined for fire or that other person absent from church, but with each of us. This happens by repentance that confesses our sins, a life that treasures the gift of our baptism, and the bearing of fruit where the Holy Spirit is at work upon our lives. This love from God in Christ during Advent holds the same pattern for making our way to others. Hearts opened now seek to, “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” The road to Christ has been laid by John, but to maintain such usefulness requires constant care. Plow out Christ’s path for God’s way to you goes the same for others. Amen. Now the peace of Christ be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.