

Road Work  
Sermon on Luke 3:1-6 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, December 10, 2006

The only thing that has changed significantly in the past 2000 years about the building of roads is neither the engineering nor the technology, but the bureaucracy involved. The physical construction of a road is fairly basic: first you must clear the roadway of stones, trees, or other obstructions. Second, the road has to be graded or leveled to make the road smooth. Finally, the roadbed is filled in with layers of different materials to create the road surface. As I said, pretty simple. The bureaucracy is much more complex: First, a road has to be planned with input from various federal, state, and local agencies as well as businesses, community groups, and individuals. Once planned, the road must be designed with anticipated traffic volume, the roadway's intended function, and terrain in mind. Before construction actually begins, dozens of different environmental regulations must be met. Then right-of-way must be secured, either by purchasing private property or through the exercise of eminent domain. Only then can a contract be put out for bid and construction begin.<sup>1</sup>

Since I don't have an engineering or construction background, I normally wouldn't be too interested in the how's and why's of road building. My background is the Scriptures, and the Scriptures, especially those for today, do exhibit a strong interest in road building. Luke begins chapter three with a long list of government officials, the kind of list of officials that you might find on a plaque on some public work, such as a building, a dam, or even a road. The government officials named in this list are Roman officials and their Jewish puppets, running from the emperor Tiberius to the governor Pontius Pilate to the regional rulers Herod Antipas,

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<sup>1</sup> From "How a Road Gets Built Fact Sheet" provided by the Virginia Department of Transportation on their website, <http://www.virginiadot.org/projects/pr-howroadblt.asp>.

Philip, and Lysanias. The Romans knew a thing or two about building roads, having built nearly 53,000 miles of paved road throughout Europe and North Africa by the first century.

The Israelites didn't enjoy the benefits of the Roman highway system, however. Roads in Israel, such as they were, were often little more than trails cut along the path of least resistance and generally left unpaved. Edward Robinson, who traveled in the area in the mid-1800s, writes of the main road from the coast up to Jerusalem, "The road is bad; and the whole region rocky, desolate, and dreary. The badness of the road arises mainly from the great number of loose stones, which have been [allowed] to accumulate in the path. Were these removed, the road would be a good one for the country... ." <sup>2</sup> Thus the work of building and maintaining roads consisted mostly in clearing stones and obstructions from the roadway. And with regard to the question of who did road construction and repair in ancient Israel, we should probably assume that, "as in most other times and lands, the responsibility was the government's; ... ." <sup>3</sup>

Those of us who have lived in Dallas for any length of time know that road building and maintenance is often not the city's highest priority. Since it seems to have taken over 20 years to complete the Central Expressway project, it is something of a minor miracle that the High Five project was completed both a year early and under budget!

Since it is typically the government's responsibility to build roads, then what is John the Baptist talking about out there in the wilderness when he says, "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" (Lk. 3:4c-5)? That is a lot of talk about road building, but there is no mention of any highway transportation department, Roman or Israelite.

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

John is actually quoting a text from the ancient prophet Isaiah. It was Isaiah who spoke of a voice crying out, saying, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3). Between Isaiah and Luke, a comma makes a world of difference! If you don’t believe me, consider the story of a panda who walks into a café. He orders a sandwich, eats it, then draws a gun and fires two shots into the air. “Why?” asks the confused waiter, as the panda moves toward the exit. The panda produces a badly punctuated wildlife manual and tosses it over his shoulder. “I’m a panda,” he says at the door. “Look it up.” The waiter turns to the relevant entry and, sure enough, finds an explanation. “Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.”<sup>4</sup>

Unless you are looking at the two texts side by side, it is hard to see what is going on, but what Luke has done is very significant. In the Hebrew original, Isaiah says the way of the Lord is to be prepared in the desert or wilderness. Luke works with the Greek version of Isaiah, however, and says it is the voice, in this case John the Baptist, which is in the wilderness. This change means that the way of the Lord which is to be prepared is not confined to the wilderness.<sup>5</sup> The way of the Lord which is to be prepared, the highway of God to be built, is to be built in our hearts and lives.

How are we to prepare the way of God? John called the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord by “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Lk. 3:3), a call that goes out to you and to me. Repent. Change your mind about the way your life is going. Turn around. Switch directions. Turn back to God. The prophet Malachi, who announced that God would send a messenger to prepare his way also said, “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’” (Mal. 3:7).

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<sup>4</sup> The jacket of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss (New York: Gotham Books, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 47.

We shall return by doing some road work, work meant to clear the way in order for the Lord to come to us. “Every valley shall be filled,” said John, “and every mountain and hill shall be made low” (Lk. 3:5a-b). What are the valleys in your life, the low and sometimes dangerous places where the torrents of greed and envy flood your life? Fill in those valleys with generosity and good will. What are the mountains and hills in your life, the high and sometimes lofty places from which you look down on others in arrogance and judgment? Level those places with humility and mercy. “The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,” said John (3:5c-d). What is crooked in your life, bent out of shape or twisted out of alignment? Is it your desire to be obedient or your intent to submit your will to God’s? Consent to be reshaped and refashioned by the refining fire of the message of repentance. What is rough in your life? Is it a haphazard prayer life? An inability to control your temper or your tongue? Allow the Holy Spirit to work within you so that you might be “pure and blameless” (Phil 1:9).

When we repent and admit our rough-edged brokenness, our going off in the wrong direction, God approaches us to do some road work of his own. In love and patience, God first clears away hearts of stone that resist his love. Next God smoothes the way for a renewed relationship by offering us forgiveness through his remarkable grace. Finally God adds layer upon layer of grace, building us up in love so that we will be able to walk the road of discipleship. The Lord comes to those who are prepared to receive him.

The message of John, a lonely voice crying out in the wilderness, is that God will make a way to his people if they will make a way for him. This way-making and road-building of God bypasses government bureaucracies of every age. The work of road-building happens in the hearts of those who hear the voice of the messenger whom God has sent saying, “Repent and be baptized!” We build a highway for the Lord when we fill the valleys and level the plains of our

hearts; when we make straight the crooked and smooth the rough ways of our lives. We do this, for the Word of God has come to us and we have seen the salvation of God.