

*Come, Holy Spirit; come like a fire and burn, come like the wind and cleanse.
Convict, convert and consecrate our lives to our great good and to your great glory. Amen.*

When I was young, my family lived in Congo for two years. I vividly remember the day the Apollo 11 astronauts came to Kinshasa on a world tour, and our whole school went out to wave at them coming by. Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin... what I remember most vividly is the crowds of people lining the road, waiting with anticipation for their vehicle to pass by, and breaking into great cheers when they finally came into view.

That is a good image for Advent, this period of time when we focus on what it means to anticipate a coming hero, what it means to make a way. Waiting, waiting, excited, looking up the road – where is He? Is He coming? This is year-round, life-round stuff, but we zoom in on it in this season. And we don't just wait – we get the road ready. We are road clearers, highway-builders, those who make a level road for Jesus to walk into our lives.

That was John the Baptist's mission, to "make ready a people to receive their king." His whole purpose was to prepare people for the coming of the Redeemer, the Anointed One, which is what "the Christ" means. And he was single-minded in his mission – living in bare simplicity out in the wilderness, which is most often where we find God.

To our ears, John can sound harsh: "Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand." "You poisonous snakes!" he calls the religious leaders who come out to the river to investigate why masses of people are coming to John. "Who warned you about the judgment to come? Don't think you can hide behind being religious people, church-goers. No, you've got to bear fruit. And you know what happens to the trees that don't bear good fruit? There's the ax and after that tree is chopped down, it's going on the fire." No, John is not soothing.

But he's only scary if we confuse Jesus with Santa Claus. If we think God is "making a list and checking it twice; gonna find out who's naughty or nice..." then the fact that Jesus is "comin' to town" isn't such good news, is it? But the One for whom John was preparing the way, the one who was coming, who was and is and is to come, always, in our hearts, in our world...

He's not making a list. He already knows our hearts. He wants to dwell in them, to pitch a tent, to take up residence, to get his mail there.

So John's message, "Repent! The Kingdom of God has come near..." isn't scary. It's "Make room! Clean up! Throw out what you don't need anymore.

God's Life takes up space, and wants to fill more and more of the space in us." The reason we invite the fire of God to burn in us is to make room for that Life. I once prayed, in a moment of spiritual ardor, "Set my heart on fire with love for you, Lord." And immediately I sensed a reply: "Do you know what you're asking? My fire will burn everything in you that is not of me."

Are we willing to let God burn the "chaff" in our lives, the self-indulgence and self-sufficiency? Are we willing to let God re-set our priorities? What are we unwilling to part with? What do we clutch to ourselves? Are we ready to part with patterns which keep us from receiving the fullness of God's life? Ways of being did we learn from bad models, poor teachers? What ways did we acquire to cope with intolerable pain?

This road-clearing business we're about is work we do with the Spirit, with God. And with the Spirit working in us, we're able to be the road-clearers, not only for our own lives, but in the world; Clearing the debris left by injustice and greed and terror and unholiness. Clearing the debris left by pain and sorrow and grief and alienation. Clearing a way for the power of Jesus to come into powerlessness.

This roadbuilding work has a global dimension – it is work of justice and equity. As the prophet Isaiah paints it, there will be a time when even predator-prey relations will be overturned; the leopard and goat will nap together, the lion and lamb, bear and cow, and a child can play with a snakes' nest and not get hurt. Roadbuilding has a local dimension – reaching out in love with food and care. And of course it has a spiritual dimension – reconciling the world to God. In that work, we in God's Road Crew are about building on-ramps, to facilitate connections between people and God. The place where God and humanity meet is called grace – it is a place of love without condition, of mercy beyond forgiveness. Today, after church, we will greet a whole lot of children and their families, most unknown to us. We will welcome them, strike up conversations, help the children create beautiful gingerbread houses, let the parents know this is a community that can support them in raising wonderful children.

This initiative is worthy and important and vital.

However, it will not address the larger issues of housing and childcare in America, See, the Road Crew isn't only about paving;

it is also dismantling barriers and blasting through rock.

Some of us visited the Museum of African American History and Culture yesterday - we were reminded of how much work still needs to be done to dismantle the systemic racism that privileges people who look like me, and puts up barriers to many who do not.

We are to be levelers, bringing down the mighty from their thrones

and lifting up the lowly. As our country continues through a painful time of polarization around big issues – wealth, taxes, immigration, guns, diversity – some blasting may be called for to dismantle systems that harm and oppress.

That can be noisy and disruptive. We occasionally we have to block lanes and

slow traffic and annoy people. Jesus annoyed so many people they killed him.

Even that, though, turned out to be part of God's ultimate road project.

For God's Life could not be contained by a grave – in Jesus, life spilled out, forever.

And now it spills out through us .

That royal highway we make for the Christ to come into our world,
into our lives, into our hearts – it's a two-lane road.

It becomes the road on which we have access back to God. Isaiah said,

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;

*everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

We've been set free, free to dance that highway we've been clearing.

When you feel relieved about something, set free, don't you want to run around and tell people? Invite people to join you in rejoicing?

Run to your friends and loved ones and say,

"Every debt you ever owed has been paid, every sin forgiven; you're free.

Get out of that prison of anxiety or guilt or sadness or resentment;
and join us on God's highway, a straight road leading straight to the One
who made you and loves you to the end of time and back."

We who have been redeemed are dancing by the side of the road,

waiting with wild anticipation for that motorcade to come through.

And then we get in behind it, dancing as we go. *Amen.*

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.** His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.