

“What am I doing?” That was the exact question I asked myself as the roller coaster clicked into its pull up the first hill. In my whole life I’ve ridden two roller coasters and I think that’s two more than I need to. It wasn’t that I wasn’t asking the question standing in line already, I was. Getting into the car I thought I was crazy. Just about the time most people start to feel that thrill and anticipation building towards the plunge down the first hill I was dreading every second. It wasn’t just “What am I doing?” but it was also “I shouldn’t be doing this.”

Some people like anticipation. They like their senses being raised, thinking about the thrill. Roller coasters build that kind of anticipation. There’s a growing anticipation and a thrilling conclusion that some like and some don’t like. Thankfully we have anticipation growing today without the death defying plunge. Our Advent anticipation which is growing each week leads to a thrilling conclusion at Christmas. The thrill gets ramped up today as we get closer to Christ’s arrival.

But as we get closer we find our lives look more and more like a roller coaster. Because of sin, our hearts aren’t prepared to receive him. We have too many hills and valleys with too many twists and turns blocking his path. These are sins we need to identify. And somehow we need to do away with them. If we aren’t prepared we might miss the thrill altogether. So looking at the gospel for today...

Here’s the messenger before the Messiah
Preparing hearts
Preaching the gospel

The interstate highway system has changed the way we travel. Today’s highways are fairly smooth paved roads that are well laid out and get us safely and quickly where we want to go. But that wasn’t always the case, even more so in ancient times. Kings and princes traveled more locally, meaning they traveled the same roads their people traveled. Roads better compared to farm roads than interstate highways. Dusty, dirty, curvy, and hilly. Before any major trip the king would send a delegation along the road to ensure it was in prime condition. Curves were straightened, hills lowered, valleys raised, and stones cleared away.

This is the exact picture Isaiah the prophet is thinking of when he speaks about the **“voice of one calling in the desert.”** Isaiah didn’t know his name but he knew his job description. This voice would prepare the way. This voice would go before the Lord, the Messiah, and straighten out curves, lower hills, and raise valleys along the path that leads to peoples’ hearts. Centuries passed before this voice called. When John, son of Zechariah, stepped into the barren land east of Jerusalem called the desert the voice had arrived.

You’re probably holding at least a few Christmas lists right now. As you look at those lists how many of those items will you help cross off? Does it make you proud of your giving? Feels good doesn’t it, like you’re at the top of a mountain? Or this year you may not be in the best financial position to be giving many gifts, which can make you feel like you’re in a deep valley. Maybe you’re giving to get or giving to offset something you’ve done wrong. This crooked road is giving for the wrong reasons. If giving this year leads you to the mountain of pride or the valley of despair or the crooked road of deception your heart is not prepared for the Messiah.

Every person in this room, in this world, was born with spiritual roadblocks in their hearts. Naturally people can’t see the Messiah or receive him. That’s the reason for the voice. John comes to **“Prepare the way for the Lord...every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”** The voice clearly tells us God is coming to us. John says that God wants a relationship with us based on love and he’s willing to demonstrate that love for us even while we’re sinners. John prepares the way for the Savior who is coming, alerting us to the faithful and loving God who is doing something about our sinful condition. Jesus is the fullest demonstration of God’s love to us.

Not convinced that your roadblocks have been taken down? John prepares people’s hearts until **“All mankind will see God’s salvation.”** God came to earth. Jesus arrived so that all people, including you and me, would know and see. Open your eyes to see your Savior. See him when you look at the cross. See him in the Bibles in front of you. Read those words and partake of the sacraments he gives. You have seen him, you do know him. Your heart has been prepared so you might see Jesus.

The messenger before the Messiah had a limited ministry. Others must take up the work of preparing hearts to receive Jesus. You and I have been called into that action. First we must keep ourselves prepared. Recognizing our need for a Savior is a lifelong process because the roadblocks keep popping up. Preparing ourselves helps prepare others. It helps them recognize their need for a Messiah. Use the Scriptures to take down the mountains of impenitence and straighten out crooked roads which keep them from seeing their Savior.

When Sarah Palin arrived in Norman this week it probably wasn’t the first time her team had seen the place. They would want to have seen the location so they could be prepared for whatever might be needed. But they also would have worked on getting the news out to prepare others for her arrival. Preparation of location is key, but so is spreading the news. If no one showed up to greet her it would spoil the whole trip. If John simply prepared the way into people’s hearts but that’s it the whole trip might be spoiled. Jesus needs people to know about him, his life, and death. To do this the messenger before the Messiah preached the gospel.

Out in the wilderness a long way from any iPhones or computers, Facebook or CNN's 24 hour news network, John went to work. The wilderness atmosphere helped people concentrate on his message. John was a true herald. He proclaimed God's Word and nothing more. There in the wilderness John talked to the people about repentance and their self-destructive ways. He showed them how they had completely turned away from God. They had separated themselves from God. John taught the only way to change that situation was to turn back to the living God who saves them. But they couldn't. None of this was work they could do; only God could. They would be responding to work already done, love already shown. Through the gospel John proclaimed God worked the power for them to believe it.

It doesn't take much to know our lives aren't everything we want them to be. But in our despair we wonder where we can turn. Naturally we think turning to ourselves first is the answer. At the very least I can turn to someone else who has the abilities or the know how to get my life back and make me feel better. Maybe if I send God money he'll do something. Or if I take an oath to do better, to live the best life I can. Unfortunately these don't work. They make us more sinful.

John preached to those people that day and to you today that Christ is the only offer that truly saves. The heart and soul of the gospel is that Christ won for you forgiveness of sins. God's already favorably turned to you. He showers you with forgiving love. Jesus sends your sins away as far as the east is from the west. On Judgment Day God won't even call those sins to mind. The gospel also includes baptism which offers forgiveness of sins. Baptism isn't something we do for God to prove our loyalty. It isn't a seal of some forgiveness you've already won for yourself. Baptism offers what Christ already won; God's forgiveness full and free.

The messenger before the Messiah holds out a beautiful word for us today. Prepare your hearts for Christ's arrival. Hear the gospel which takes away sins. These words draw our interest and they keep us coming back for more. Knowing Jesus has come and is coming again leads us to look forward more and more. The anticipation grows as we await the Messiah.