

Mark 1:1-8

Advent 2, Supplement Series B, December 10, 2017

- Theme: John's heart construction
- I. Preaching toward repentance
 - II. Baptizing for the forgiveness of sins

INJ "It will be nice when it is done." That is what I kept saying since the road in front of church was filled with orange barrels back in May. The traffic patterns were confusing. One lane traffic was maddening. It took work to get through town. But it sure is nice now that it is done! Like road construction in Vassar, John the Baptist does construction on our hearts. His tools are not backhoes and steamrollers, but the law and the gospel, God's Word. Advent heart construction is God's work through John also on us: preaching toward repentance and baptizing for the forgiveness of sins.

The reason the orange barrels come out on our roads is because there is a problem. Usually, the pavement is cracked and buckling. Perhaps new traffic patterns are needed for safety. Sometimes the project means rerouting the road! Just as roads need constant attention, so do our hearts. The seat of our emotion and desire and will is a crooked and twisted mess. Sin has infected us since birth and we are corrupt in every way. The road through our heart is impassable and dangerous! No way could Jesus travel through there.

Here comes John the Baptist. He is the prophet who makes the way clear for the coming of the Savior. His job is to straighten our hearts, filling the deep valleys and leveling the high mountains. He accomplishes the goal by delivering God's Word to us. Step one is recognition. Do you see that your sin makes your heart unfit for Jesus? Jesus is pure and holy and has the glory of God Almighty. Your heart doesn't fear, love, and trust in him above all things. Your heart doesn't call on him in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks. Your heart doesn't gladly hear and learn God's Word. Not to mention all the ways you mistreat your neighbor!

Look at John speaking to us. He is dressed in camel's hair. Humble. Uncomfortable. Definitely not fashionable. He eats wild honey and locusts! He isn't whipping us into an emotional frenzy. He isn't smooth-talking us out of our possessions. He isn't telling us what we want to hear for the popularity or the entertainment. John speaks God's

message of repentance. We need to hear Law: The crushing weight of our own guilt. The waywardness of our heart. The just condemnation that we have earned. Do you see your need clearly?

Jesus is just around the corner! He will come in glory and power. He will come and end the rebellion of all those who stand against him. Jesus will come, and you will not stop him from executing judgment. Jesus is coming, to crash through the thicket of our hearts and curse forever the sinner that lives there.

We need road construction, no, heart construction. We need a complete rebuild and replacement. The tools that accomplish the work – God does it through the message. Listen! The coming Lord is powerful. You won't outsmart him or overpower him. He is God who holds the whole creation in his hands! Listen to his words. Tremble before him. Humble yourself under his mighty hand!

Look again at the coming Lord. He is righteous. No fault lies in him, no blemish or scratch. He is holy and pure and without any sin. The road he travels on must be pristine. No deviation is allowed. The heart that is in you has to be terrified. It trembles before the coming Lord. Listen to John's preaching! You cannot continue to live as you do, in the filth of your sin and those habits that rage against God's holiness. Turn away from what is unjust and immoral and wrong. Not just the big things, but the hurtful words and the self-righteous thoughts, too. The sins that fester inside while they put on a sweet show for others. These things have to end!

John's heart construction destroys the prideful peaks and fills in the dreadful valleys. God does it by showing our sin. God brings us terror over our guilt. God turns us away from our wickedness. God does it through preaching toward repentance. Don't keep on in your sin! Repentance is God changing our path. He digs out the crumbling infrastructure. Fills in the potholes. Replaces the crud with righteousness that he provides. It is a completely new path!

The Lord who is coming to us knows us. We aren't a faceless number in a spreadsheet or a speck of sand on the seashore. He knows you personally and completely. None of your sins escapes his notice. None of your guilt slips through the cracks. Doesn't he make your heart hurt with his word? Mark writes in our lesson that the whole countryside and the whole city came out to hear John preach. It was powerful preaching. Moving preaching. God does heart construction with

preaching toward repentance.

The first part of construction is the tearing apart. It is usually easier. With heart construction, not so much. God has to do the work of bringing us terror and turning us away from our sin. He does a miracle to give us repentance, but he doesn't stop with demolition. Our God also rebuilds. He replaces our evil rebellious heart with a new one that trusts Jesus. This is also a miracle from God! In baptism Jesus the Coming One builds with the gospel message for the forgiveness of sins.

When John the Baptist appeared, he was the fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way before you." He spoke Isaiah's message, too. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

You have comfort because God came in history. He came to take on flesh and to stand under the law's power in your place. He came to carry the agony of guilt on the cross and pay for sin fully. Jesus is your comfort. You have received from him a double blessing from your God: the peace of forgiveness and a home in heaven.

Through the preaching of Isaiah and the preaching of John and the preaching you hear today, God works miracles. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." God gives faith through his words. He strengthens faith and keeps faith strong by those words. The benefit of coming to church has little to do with the things we do here. What God does is more important! God gives us his Holy Spirit. Isn't that the reason we get up and get going and rearrange our schedules so we can be here? God does heart construction, the rebuilding of our hearts, when we hear his words! Isn't it precious to hear forgiveness proclaimed to you in Christ Jesus your Savior? Without it, you would have no comfort and no peace. We need what God gives to us through his Holy Word!

The same benefit comes to us in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Mark writes: "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." God gives faith in baptism. It is the same faith worked by preaching, because the power of baptism is the same Word of God. When God's powerful word is connected with water, he promises to send his Holy Spirit. The Spirit delivers the blessings Jesus won. In baptism, he works

repentance. There he forgives sin. There he gives faith. He does a miracle, building a new heart that loves the Savior and that rejoices to be an heir of heaven.

Baptism is a powerful demonstration of the Good News of salvation in Christ alone. Next week we will have the privilege to witness two infant baptisms. None of the parents are members of our congregation, but both families have connections to other WELS churches. They will come to St. Luke's to hear the message of repentance. God will do heart construction on us all through the preaching. In the Sacrament, those two babies will be adopted into God's family. You won't want to miss it. God has blessed us to be able to watch as he does miracles!

Just as road construction never stops, neither does heart construction. The new believer baby being held at the font after baptism still needs God's powerful word to keep the faith alive and growing. As children grow, they need their parents to teach them about Jesus. Children need to be connected, just as adults do, to the gospel. Your church is important in that connection to the gospel!

The congregation is just a tool, though, just as John the Baptist was just a tool. He was not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of the sandals of the Coming One! Jesus is the Coming Lord who sends the Holy Spirit. He sends that Spirit to us in baptism. He sends that Spirit to us through the preaching of the word. We have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, for we have been given a new heart of faith.

The Spirit continues his work long after the day of a baptism through the word of God. He does continual heart construction, but it isn't a bad thing like orange barrels are. This is good: a daily drowning of my sinful self. God brings me to repentance. Terror. Turning. God comforts me with forgiveness. Trust. Every day my new nature shines.

Jesus gives me everything I need through the preaching of his word: Like John, a true humility and an honest recognition of my sins: repentance. Like John, a confident trust that Jesus forgives me. Like John, a bold confession and clear proclamation that I have a Savior. He is coming again. I am ready for Jesus' appearing. So are you, because he himself has made you ready. You hear God's Word. You live your baptism. By means of his word, God makes the road of your heart straight. Heart construction is ongoing. It sure will be great when it is done – and then we will have heaven our home! SDG Amen.