

## ***“The LORD Prepares the Way”***

As Lutherans, we confess this to be the Christian truth – that “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.”

Now, how does that square with our Scripture readings for today? Does this confession contradict what our Lord says through Malachi and Isaiah and John the Baptist – when they preach – “Prepare the way of the Lord”?

Whose work is this – this preparing the way of the Lord? Is that our work? John the Baptist’s work? Malachi or Isaiah’s? Or, is this the Lord’s work?

Well, consider this. Have you ascended into heaven – or has God descended to you? Did Israel make their way through the Red Sea to come to the Lord who waited for them on the other side – or did the Lord lead Israel through the waters on dry land? Did dead Lazarus prepare the way for Jesus – or did Jesus come to him?

God clearly teaches us in His Word, that He is the One who takes the initiative and does the work. Or, to use the language of His Word set before us today – He is the One who fills the valleys, lowers the mountains, and makes the ways straight and smooth.

In the Old Testament, “the way of the Lord” is usually depicted as two ways, or two paths. From Psalm 1 we hear – “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seats of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night ... for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1:1, 6)

The path set before Adam and Eve couldn’t have been any straighter. The Lord said eat THIS fruit and you will live – eat THAT fruit and you shall die.

The devil lies and deceives, seeking to lead mankind into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Sin corrupts and convolutes God’s path of life – and man easily goes astray. And yet, “as it was in the beginning” – the Lord takes the initiative – promising salvation for Adam and Eve, and all of their descendants.

It is God who raises up from stone-dead sinners – children for Abraham, the father of all believers. God the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, breathes life into a valley of dead, dry bones.

The Lord invites rebel-children into His presence on Mt. Sinai, and on the Mountain of Transfiguration. And on Calvary – it is the Lord alone who ascends the cross – tearing the Temple curtain in two with His death, so that all sinners might enter into His eternal fellowship.

In both the Old and New Testament eras, it is the Lord whom COMES to mankind – for our redemption, for our salvation. He who came in the flesh at Bethlehem – and will come to you again on the Last Day – comes to you now, in these days (today) – to keep you in His way, the way of life everlasting.

To walk the path that the Lord sets before us is treacherous – actually, it's impossible for sinful man. As you well know, our old sinful nature is constantly taking detours. It motors through life – over the legal limit of sin --- and even through we are recklessly swerving all over the place --- when asked, we say we're doing just fine.

Day after day we climb into the driver's seat – relegating God to the back seat, or the trunk, or out the door – as we say, "I'll drive." If it is up to us to take the initiative – it would be hopeless – because we'd simply keep going our merry, and crooked, way.

Through the mouth of the psalmist the Lord cries out – "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt ... But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. Oh, that my people would LISTEN to me, that Israel would WALK in my ways."

So it was in the days of Malachi the prophet – that God's children would not listen to His voice and walk in His ways – and so He promises to come "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." "I the Lord do not change" – but the Lord, in His mercy – comes to change you.

He comes to deliver you from yourself – to deliver you from your trespasses. He comes to stop you dead in your tracks – piercing your heart and soul, revealing your deadly sin – rendering you helpless to do anything about it.

And the Lord does His work – refining, cleansing, purifying – repenting you. He leads you to trust in His gracious forgiveness alone for your salvation. He comes to prepare the way for you – so that along with “all flesh” you “shall see the salvation of our God.”

Today, standing before the judgment seat of God – you confessed your sin, your unworthiness, your inability to free yourself from your sinful condition – you confessed your inability to save yourself. That is God at work – preparing the way of the Lord.

God at work – so that with repentant hearts you cried out – “Almighty God, have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and lead us to everlasting life.”

And only out of Fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in you – He forgave all your sin – for Jesus’ sake. He set you free. He set you back on His path, His “way of life.”

He set you free – and like the one with two tunics and the tax collectors and the soldiers – you ask, “What then shall we do?” It’s not – what shall we do to be saved – but, because you have delivered us, because we are set free – now what would you have us to do?

How foolish when one set free from prison returns to the old way – only to end up imprisoned again. You are set free from sin to actually live the life God created you to live – living according to His Word and will – living the “good” life that He intends and desires for you – the “good” life He leads you into.

“As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever” – the Lord’s Word is a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path. The Lord comes to you – to rescue you – to prepare the way for you – to lead you to your heavenly home.

And so we pray: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.