

Luke 3:1-6

"The Highway of the Lord"

April 14, 2024

1. If you've ever been on the Creek Turnpike just a couple of miles from here, right at about 33rd West Ave you'll see an abnormally large hill off to the north
 - a. In case you didn't know, that is the Creek County Landfill
 - i. I'm not sure how long that area has been a landfill, but I know we've been using it pretty regularly for at least the past twenty-three years
 1. When I came back home after college to work for my dad, I eventually ended up being the one to make most of the "dump runs" with all of our construction debris
 - a. Now, over twenty years later, Joshua is making most of MY dump runs!
 - ii. If you've never gotten the privilege of enjoying a trip to the Creek County Landfill, it is quite the experience!
 1. Over the decades, as Tulsa has brought all their junk to the landfill, the hill has steadily grown higher and higher, and wider and wider
 2. As people bring their truckloads of stuff, they dump it off, and then a big bulldozer pushes a bunch of dirt over it
 - a. It's pretty interesting... most of the hill that you can see from the road is now covered with lush green grass, and even a bunch of wildflowers since it's springtime
 3. But one of the things that makes the landfill such an experience is THE ROAD that you have to drive on to get to the actual dump site
 - a. Just imagine what a dirt road would be like, with large dump trucks driving on it all day long, six days a week
 - b. And, now that the landfill mountain has gotten so big, you have to drive all the way around to the backside of the hill, and then up the hill on a curvy road to where all the trash is
 - i. And all along the way, you're dodging massive potholes, mudholes, and all sorts of trash that has blown out of the backs of peoples' trucks
 - ii. The speed limit sign on this road is 15mph
 1. I personally think this is for the safety of the trucks themselves, as you'd be sure to blow a tire or break an axle if you went flying down this road!
 - c. Like I said, it is quite an experience!
 - i. But... it's a landfill, right?
 - ii. What else would you expect from a road at the county dump?
 - b. But just imagine for a moment...
 - i. Imagine some prince from a far-off country... maybe Europe, or the Middle East, ends up moving to Tulsa to start a business
 1. Maybe, somehow, this prince hears about this big piece of land south of Tulsa, that has been built up over the years so that now, if you drive to the top of this huge hill, you have this fantastic panoramic view of the entire city
 2. The prince, knowing that he has the resources to turn even a landfill into luxurious homesite, sends one of his assistants to meet with the owners of the landfill
 - a. This assistant explains to the owners who the prince is, and what he's wanting to do with the land

- i. And then he tells the owners of the landfill that money is no object, and that he is prepared to pay a ridiculous sum of money in order to purchase the entire property
 - ii. But, here's the deal... the prince wants to come check it out in just a few weeks, and see if it will meet all of his desires
 - ii. So what do you think the owners of the landfill would do?
 - 1. We'll, I know if it was me, I would get all my workers together...
 - a. I'd get all my heavy machinery... my bulldozers, my dump trucks, my road graders
 - b. I'd get everyone to work RIGHT AWAY on getting that road to the top of the mountain nice and smooth!
 - i. I'd have them fill in the potholes, get rid of all the mudholes, and clean up every little bit of trash along the way
 - ii. If I was REALLY serious about impressing this prince, I might even invest the money into paving the entire road with asphalt
 - iii. A foreign prince... with unlimited resources... coming to MY landfill to buy it and turn it into his estate???
 - 1. You'd pull out all the stops, wouldn't you?
 - iii. In reality, the owners of the landfill couldn't care less about making the road nice for a bunch of construction workers like me
 - 1. But when ROYALTY is involved, everything changes, doesn't it?
2. Well, this is where we find ourselves as we begin chapter three of the Gospel of Luke
 - a. We've spent many weeks walking through Gabriel's announcements regarding both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ
 - i. We've looked at multiple different facets of the Christmas story, as we celebrated the birth of our Savior into the world
 - ii. And last week, we looked at the boy, Jesus, who, even at the young age of twelve years old, was fully conscious of his Divine Sonship
 - b. But now... we are here!
 - i. Jesus has grown into a man
 - ii. His time of obscurity in Nazareth has come to an end
 - iii. His time to enter into his short, three-year mission, is now at hand
 - 1. But he cannot enter the scene just yet
 - a. FIRST, the prophet must come!
 - i. The prophet, who would turn many of the children of Israel BACK to their God
 - ii. The prophet, who would go before the Messiah in the spirit and the power of Elijah
 - iii. The prophet, who would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children
 - 1. And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just
 - 2. And to make ready for the Lord a people prepared
 - a. The prophet must come first!
 - c. So Luke, being the detail-oriented historian that he was, first must set the stage...
3. Luke 3:1-2
 - a. *¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*
 - i. So, that is a LOT of names that Luke just rattled off!

1. But really, if we've spent much time in the Gospels, many of these names are familiar to us
 - a. Of course, we encounter Pilate at the end of the Gospels as Jesus is put on trial and then beaten by the Romans
 - b. The Herod of this passage is not the same Herod from the Christmas story, the one who kills all the baby boys in Bethlehem
 - i. This is his son, Herod, who is now just one of four rulers in the region, which is what the word "tetrarch" means
 - ii. Philip is Herod's brother, and is also the one whose wife Herod steals, which will put him in the line of fire of John the Baptist later in the Gospels
 - c. And then Annas and Caiaphas will also come into play during Jesus' trial as well
2. So, for the purposes of this sermon, we won't spend much time with these men
 - a. What's important to note is that, despite MANY attempts to find fault or error in Luke's history and chronology, most scholars agree that Luke WAS accurate in his records
 - i. For us as Christians, we might say, "Well of course he was accurate... this is THE BIBLE after all!!"
 - ii. But it still ought to serve to strengthen our faith when, after nearly two thousand years of people poking at it and trying to dismantle it, the Scriptures STILL prove trustworthy!!
4. So Luke sets the context for us, and he says that, during the reign of all these various leaders, "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness."
 - a. Just pause for a moment and let that sink in
 - i. This is the first prophet God has spoken through in over FOUR HUNDRED years
 - ii. Even though John makes his appearance in the New Testament, he is truly the last of the OLD TESTAMENT prophets
 1. The major prophets... Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, have long since died
 2. The minor prophets... Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi... all have passed away
 - a. The word of God came to ALL of them, and they were all faithful in proclaiming it
 - i. Some more immediately faithful than others, but they ALL eventually proclaimed God's Word in its full
 1. And very often, to their own physical detriment
 - ii. The prophets were not a people who were well-liked by the masses
 1. But that wasn't the point of their calling, was it?
 2. It was pretty much a given that, to be a TRUE prophet of God, you would be laughed at...
 - a. You would be mocked...
 - b. You would be rejected...
 - iii. But to a man, these prophets were faithful to their God
 - b. And God's people killed them for it
 - iii. And now, after four hundred years of silence, God had once again called one man to step into this role
 1. John's ministry would be like a can of gasoline poured out upon a small burning ember

- a. His message would ignite the hearts of the people, more than they had known for CENTURIES
 - i. But his ministry wouldn't last long, would it?
 - ii. We talk often about how incredibly short-lived Jesus' ministry was, as he preached and taught for only a little over three years before he was killed
- b. No one really knows how long John ministered before he was beheaded, some say maybe at the most about two and a half years
 - i. But some believe it was only a year or so at best
 - 1. John answered the call to be one of God's faithful prophets
 - a. And it cost him his life
 - 2. But we see in John's story that this was truly an incredible moment in the history of GOD'S story, as we start to feel the beginnings of a MASSIVE shift in the plot!
- iv. So the word of God came to John in the wilderness, and verse three tells us...

5. Luke 3:3

- a. *3And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*
 - i. For the Jews in those days, baptism was not a new concept
 - 1. As far back as Leviticus, God had commanded His people to perform acts of ceremonial cleansing when they came into contact with lepers, or the unclean, or those who had died
 - a. Over the centuries, the Jewish religious leaders also began to institute baptism as a sign for non-Jews to convert to Judaism
 - b. So baptism was not just seen as a ritual cleansing, but also as a symbol of conversion
 - ii. But note the difference in John's baptism
 - 1. John's baptism was not seen as a ritual that made one pure
 - 2. Nor was it seen as a symbol of conversion into Judaism
 - a. John's baptism was first a baptism of REPENTANCE
 - b. And second, it was a baptism for the FORGIVENESS OF SINS
- b. Let's talk first about John's baptism as a baptism of repentance
 - i. If you think about John's role as a prophet of the Lord, this makes complete sense
 - 1. Every time a prophet was raised up in the Old Testament, their main message was... REPENT!
 - a. Turn BACK to your God!
 - 2. So many times in the New Testament, the Old Testament is referred to as "the Law and the Prophets"
 - a. The reason is that these two categories go hand-in-hand
 - i. God had revealed to His people His law, His commands
 - 1. His way that He had ordained in order for them to flourish in the Land
 - ii. And every time His people strayed from His law, God sent a prophet to call them back to Himself
 - 1. He sent the prophets to call them to REPENTANCE
 - 3. But God had no desire for an empty turning back
 - a. He had no need for their outward acts of the "ritual cleansing" of the outside of their bodies, while their HEARTS were still far from Him
 - i. His desire was that the people would repent IN THEIR HEARTS
 - 1. As the Lord said to Isaiah in Isaiah 29:13,

- a. *13These people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me...*
 - b. *Their fear of me is just a commandment taught by men*
4. So John did not come telling the masses, "Hey, let me dunk you in the water and then God will be happy with you!"
 - a. This baptism was a baptism signifying a TRUE repentance in their hearts
 - i. A truly GODLY sorrow over the way they had turned away from God and His commands
 - b. And for those who were TRULY repentant, the forgiveness of sins was given
- c. Now this might make us a little uncomfortable, right?
 - i. As Christians, we wholeheartedly believe that the forgiveness of sins is found ONLY in Christ, and our forgiveness has ONLY been secured for us by HIS blood shed upon the cross
 - 1. So how is it that these who were baptized by John, a good three years before Christ's death upon the cross, were forgiven from their sin?
 - a. Well, they were forgiven from their sin the very same way that you and I have been forgiven from OUR sin
 - i. By the grace of God, through FAITH in the PROMISES of God!
 - 1. The Old Testament saints, and all who were baptized by John, had to look ahead, IN FAITH, to the promises that were yet to be fulfilled
 - ii. This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews affirms for us at the beginning of that great chapter known as the "Hall of Faith," chapter 11, as he says in verses 1 and 2
 - 1. *¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation.*
 - a. The Old Testament saints had a conviction of things that they had not seen
 - b. And in this faith – in this BELIEF – they were saved!
2. Paul also shows us this truth in Acts 19, when he goes to Ephesus and encounters a group of men that Luke refers to as disciples
 - a. Paul asks them in Acts 19:2, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"
 - i. They replied to him, "No, we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit!"
 - b. Paul asks them then, "Into what then were you baptized?"
 - i. And they replied, "Into John's baptism."
 - c. Paul then explained to them, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to BELIEVE in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus."
 - i. And when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they all began speaking in tongues and prophesying
3. The sins of these men had been forgiven when they were baptized by John, in TRUE repentance
 - a. They had been saved, not by their good works, but by their belief in the ONE WHO WAS TO COME, that is, Jesus
- d. So, Luke tells us that this last of the great prophets preached a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins

- i. And then Luke points us back nearly seven centuries to the words of ANOTHER prophet, the prophet Isaiah
- 6. In Luke 3:4-6, we read...
 - a. *⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*
 - i. Friends, do not miss the importance of what Luke is saying through Isaiah here
 - 1. Yes, we are called to repent and turn back to the Lord for the forgiveness of our sin
 - 2. But, ULTIMATELY, the point of John's message WAS NOT the forgiveness of the people
 - a. The ULTIMATE point of John's message from God, as he cried out in the wilderness, was...
 - i. Prepare the way for the Lord!
 - 1. The King is coming!!
 - a. It is time for us to get the road ready for his arrival
 - i. Fill every pothole
 - ii. Bulldoze every bumpy spot
 - iii. Straighten out the dangerous curves
 - iv. Make every rough section level
 - b. For the King is on his way!!
 - ii. Your lives of sin and apathy and complacency were sufficient for living according to the ways of the world...
 - 1. Your road was just fine for a landfill!
 - iii. But this road is not fit for the One who is on his way
 - 1. So prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths STRAIGHT!!
 - ii. This was John's sole mission
 - 1. This was what he was born to do
 - a. God had set him apart from even before his mother's womb for one singular purpose:
 - i. To prepare the highway for Jesus' coming, by turning the hearts of the people back to their God
- b. We see this even more clearly when we go back to Isaiah's words in Isaiah 40... let's turn there together
 - i. Starting in verse 3...
 - 1. *³A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*
 - a. Why did John call the people to repent and turn back to God
 - i. So the GLORY OF THE LORD would be revealed!
 - b. Why did God choose to forgive their sin?
 - i. So the GLORY OF THE LORD would be revealed!
 - c. Why did Jesus, the Messiah sent by God, come to this earth?
 - i. So the GLORY OF THE LORD would be revealed!
- c. And in order for the glory of the Lord to be revealed, the HIGHWAY of the Lord must be made STRAIGHT

- i. For ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, the highway of the Lord has been more like the road at the county dump
 - 1. Before the fall, Adam and Eve walked freely in the Garden of God's beauty and perfection
 - a. There were no sticker bushes to get entangled in
 - b. There were no hidden sinkholes they might fall into
 - c. There were no rough places where they might gash their naked feet
 - i. The paths of the Garden were smooth and even... pleasing to both the feet and the eyes
 - 2. But when they gave in to the temptations of the serpent, when they desired in their own hearts to usurp the rule and reign of their Creator, all of this was taken from them
 - a. They were banished from the Garden, and the cherubim with their flaming swords were placed there to guard the way to the tree of life
 - i. The road was lost
 - ii. The Highway of the Lord became overgrown
- d. We get glimpses of this highway throughout the Scriptures, sometimes veiled as if through a great mist, sometimes almost as clear as day
 - i. We see Abraham in Genesis 12, a pagan man from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, as God calls him onto this highway and says,
 - 1. *¹"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."*
 - a. And Abraham set out upon the Highway of the Lord, to the land of Canaan
 - ii. We see Jacob in Genesis 35, as God calls him to travel the road to Bethel in Canaan, and there God says to him,
 - 1. *¹⁰"Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name... ¹¹I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. ¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you."*
 - a. And Jacob and his sons traveled down the Highway of the Lord, and they dwelled in the land of Canaan
 - iii. We see the people of Israel in Exodus 33, now a nation of MILLIONS of people, as they prepare to leave Mt. Sinai
 - 1. After God miraculously delivered them from the bondage of their slavery in Egypt
 - 2. After God baptized them in the waters of the Red Sea
 - 3. After God began to sanctify them through the giving of the Law
 - a. God says to them,
 - i. *¹"Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' ²I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey..."*
 - b. And Israel once again set out upon the Highway of the Lord to Canaan
- e. Sadly, we see over and over and over again, throughout the history of God's people, they lost their way, didn't they?

- i. They eventually made it to the Promised Land, only to lose it again as God punished them in their idolatry by sending King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon
 - 1. The remnant found their way back to the Highway of the Lord after their exile in Babylon, but things were not the same, were they?
 - a. The mighty walls of Jerusalem had been torn down
 - b. The great Temple had been destroyed
 - c. They had found their way back to Zion, but the GLORY of Zion was no longer there
- 7. The Highway of the Lord was in shambles
 - a. For the people of God had forgotten this crucial fact:
 - i. The Highway of the Lord was not a physical road that could be rebuilt with bulldozers and road graders and trucks loaded full of asphalt
 - 1. The Highway of the Lord begins right here, in our HEARTS
 - a. The hearts of the people of Israel had become full of ruts and potholes
 - b. The hearts of the people of Israel had become overgrown with weeds, and were now rough and crooked
 - c. Like the road at the landfill, the hearts of the people of Israel had become littered with garbage
 - i. For they had turned away from their God
 - 1. They had turned away from His laws
 - 2. They had turned away from the highway that he had given to them, the highway that would have led them to happiness and flourishing in Him
 - ii. And so God did what He had always done
 - 1. He raised up a prophet
 - a. He raised up a man who would be bold enough to go to the people and tell them that they MUST repent
 - b. A man who would call them to prepare the way for the King, for he would be there SOON
 - i. And in this landfill that exists in our own hearts, this King would begin to build HIS Kingdom!
- 8. John's message was simple: Prepare the way of the Lord... make straight in the desert a highway for our God
 - a. My friends, the message is the same for us today, for our King is coming back a second time, isn't he?
 - i. Only this time, there's a difference in this Highway of the Lord
 - 1. WE are now called to begin OUR pilgrimage down this Highway
 - a. This isn't a wide turnpike like the new section of I-44 heading to Oklahoma City
 - b. This isn't even a nice straight highway like 117
 - 2. Today, for us, the Highway of the Lord is narrow... and the highway of the Lord is hard
 - a. These are the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 7:13-14
 - i. *¹³Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*
 - b. John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress*, illustrates this truth in a beautiful, yet painful way
 - i. The main character, Christian, sets off on his journey to the Celestial City
 - 1. But he finds out very quickly that the road is hard

2. The road is difficult
3. And the road is oftentimes very lonely
- ii. All along the way he is tempted to stray off the road, as people tell him all sorts of easier ways to go...
 1. Roads that are full of leisure and fun
 2. Roads that are full of all sorts of pleasures and treasures
 - a. And every time Christian veers off the path, he finds himself in great danger and despair
- iii. Christian eventually makes it to the Celestial City, but the vast majority of people he encounters along the way get left behind
 1. For they didn't care for the narrow path
 - a. They didn't like the fact that Christian's path was hard
 - b. They didn't like the fact that they had to walk it BY FAITH
 - c. They didn't like the fact that it required of them that they be HOLY
 - i. So they chose the broad path... the easy path... and it led them to their destruction
- c. Friends, we are called to walk the Way of Holiness as we follow Christ
 - i. As we heard at the beginning of the service, THIS is the Highway of the Lord
 1. THIS is the Highway to Zion
 2. THIS is the Highway that we must travel as we go on our way to meet the King
 - a. And so the message for us today is the same as it was two thousand years ago...
 - i. Prepare the way for the Lord
 1. Make straight paths for Him
 - a. Fill in the valleys of your heart
 - b. Smooth out the rough roads of your soul
 - c. Walk along the Way of Holiness
 - ii. For this road will not ALWAYS be hard
 - iii. This road will not ALWAYS be difficult
- d. We'll close today by reading all of Isaiah 35, as we set our gaze upon the future Highway of the Lord, the Highway upon which ALL of the redeemed will walk with great singing, as we near the Celestial City of Zion!
 - i. *¹The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; ²it 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.*
 - ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."*
 - ⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*
 - ⁸And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; [and fools will not wander on it.] ⁹No 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. ¹⁰And the ransomed of the LORD shall return*

and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

1. Lift your drooping hands, Christians
2. Strengthen your feeble knees
3. Strive for holiness, without which NO ONE will see the Lord
 - a. Prepare the way of the King, friends
 - b. For we are almost home!!