

Lexington Presbyterian Church
Lexington, Virginia
Straight Paths
December 6, 2020
Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Groome III

At the beginning of the gospel of Mark is a straight line. Not a circle, but a straight path. Point A to point B. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

There aren't a lot of very straight roads around here, but there is one in particular, according to *roadsideamerica.com* North Dakota Highway 46, is supposedly the straightest of them all -- plumb line straight -- the longest straight road in America. It stretches across 123 miles of North Dakota prairie.

Of course every "straight" road shifts a little bit here and there, bending just a bit around a rock or a tree or making an adjustment to cross a bridge . . . and so does HWY 46. But this road has a reputation, and it should be held to a higher standard. With this in mind, the best that it offers -- its longest straight-as-an-arrow, lock your steering wheel and take a nap stretch -- extends nearly 31 miles. Compared to 123 miles that doesn't sound like much, but it's still impressive, especially for a two-lane blacktop.

There is one stretch of straight American road that's even longer than ND 46 -- Interstate 80 across the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. It runs bullet-straight east from just past exit 4 almost to mile marker 40, where it makes a slight jog. That's 35 miles. But when you're rocketing across a featureless death zone at 85 mph, it hardly seems that far.

--"A very long, straight road," *The Roadside America Website*, roadsideamerica.com

However, a lot of what we do in life is go around in circles.

- We keep eating the same kinds of junk food, and wonder why it's hard to lose weight.
- We continue to move in the same social circles, and are curious about why we don't meet any new people.
- We keep picking on family members in exactly the same way, and then are surprised by a blow-up or fight.
- We keep doing our work assignments in a repetitive manner, and then lament that we never advance in our careers.
- We're pedestrians! Moving in circles. In fact, one of the definitions of the word "pedestrian" is "lacking distinction, ordinary." The time has come for us to break out of our endless loops and do something truly distinctive and extraordinary: *Walk the straight path.*

Mark tells us that the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with the appearance of John the Baptizer. He is the one who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (vv. 1-3).

Make his paths straight, says Isaiah. Take the twists, turns and circles of life and stretch them out. Create a straight line to Jesus Christ—point A to point JC.

JTB does this by appearing in the wilderness and "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4). He challenges people to break out of the destructive cycle of sinfulness by changing their minds and walking in a new direction—that's the core meaning of "repentance," from the Greek word *metanoia*. John invites people to turn around and to take a new path away from sin and toward Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, most people associate the word "repentance" with simply being sorry. John isn't asking people to be sorry, but is challenging them to change their lives. John's baptism of repentance is better translated as:

A baptism "to show that they had turned from their sins and turned to God" (*New Living Translation*).

A baptism "to show that they were changing their hearts and lives" (*Common English Bible*).

"A baptism of life-change" (*The Message*).

Because people were hungry for life-change, they flocked to see John. They desperately wanted to break out of their self-destructive cycles and move in a new direction, so "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins" (v. 5).

The people of Judea had a choice: Keep moving in circles, or find a straight path. While the ordinary, pedestrian approach would be to keep walking in laps, large numbers decided to take an extraordinary step and go out to John, the one "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt about his waist" (v. 6). He promised to put them in touch with Jesus, the one he said "is more powerful than I," the one who "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (vv. 7-8).

Give the people credit: They chose to break their sinful cycles and get on a straight path to Jesus. And we can make the same choice today.

As we move another week deeper into the season of Advent, let's turn to God, begin to change our hearts and lives and experience a true life-change. Although our lives often feel like endless circles, we can replace our pedestrianism with a walk in the Jesus direction. Along this path, Jesus steers us and strengthens us.

Jesus *steers* us. He is ahead of us on the road, leading us in the right direction, toward a life of love, joy, peace and simplicity.

Yes, simplicity. Jan Lorah, spiritual director at the Davidson Center for the Professions in Davidson, NC, (which I attended in 2014 when I was on the verge of burnout among other things) says that "less is more" in the life of a Christian. Cluttered schedules and cluttered closets can lead

to cluttered minds and cluttered spirits. "As we ascend the ladder of success," she observes, "the pursuit of a more luxurious lifestyle starts to drive all our decisions. This starts eating up our time and money—until what we're going to buy and where we're going to go become our primary focus. Before we know it, our lives are dedicated to the maintenance of all our STUFF."

You remember what Jesus said to the rich man, don't you? "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). He was inviting the man into a life of love, joy, peace and simplicity. But the man wouldn't do it. He was shocked and went away grieving, feeling anything but joy and peace. He had a cluttered closet and a cluttered spirit.

As we move through the Christmas shopping season, let's not let our online shopping carts prevent us from seeing where Jesus is steering us. He wants us to focus on him, not on luxurious lifestyles. As country singer George Strait noted,

*You don't bring nothing with you here
And you can't take nothing back
I ain't never seen a hearse, with a luggage rack.*

This path is tough to walk, but fortunately Jesus *strengthens* us. He baptizes us "with the Holy Spirit" (v. 8), filling us with his presence and power. The Spirit of Christ offers us love, joy and peace, as well as other spiritual gifts: "patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). These gifts are the marks of a Christian life, and are the clearest signs that a person is moving along the path of Jesus.

When the people of Galilee were threatened by false prophets, Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). He was aware that some people can talk a good game and make a positive impression, but they lack the inner health and integrity to produce anything worthwhile - - they're examples of how "the bad tree bears bad fruit" (v. 17).

We all know that bad fruit comes from lying and stealing, cutting corners and cheating. We see it all around us, and maybe within us as well, if we don't repent, turn toward God, make a life-change and get on the right track. Fortunately, the straight path is available to us, with Jesus steering us and strengthening us. If we walk the line with Jesus, we'll be able to produce the kinds of fruit that will be good for us and for everyone around us.

So let's get out of our endless loops and walk in a new direction -- point A to point JC.

Sources:

Algeo, Matthew. "Competitive walking was the national pastime until baseball came along." *The Washington Post*. March 30, 2014, washingtonpost.com.

Douty, Linda R. "Getting from Sunday to Monday." *Stepping Stones for Spiritual Growth*, 2002, explorefaith.org.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.