

The first step in building is usually demolition of some sort. If there is an old structure there, it must be taken out. Or at least, there are trees to be removed, ground to be leveled; there is almost always something that must be removed in order to build.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. If there is going to be some real building happening, first there must be demolition. This can be seen in many ways, and one whose job was especially this spiritual demo work was John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was sent by God with a specific job. This job was so important that Isaiah prophesied it centuries before. Our text quotes this from Is 40:3, John is to be, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

Literally, the call was to Prepare the road of the Lord. His job, therefore, was to prepare the road for the Lord to come. Isaiah continues this by saying: “Every 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.”

We’ve all seen this done. The first step in creating a new roadbed is the leveling of the path. A trench is carved through the top of a tall hill, and low places are filled in to make the road more level. Heavy equipment levels and smooths the roadbed.

This idea of clearing the way and smoothing paths was commonly done in preparation for the coming of ancient kings. Even today we often fix things up when a dignitary is coming.

John’s message is to get ready, not just for a king but the King of Kings! He makes it clear that the One who is coming is no ordinary person: “he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Not only that, but this is the One who is

to judge all peoples, as he says: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John’s message is to get ready for the coming of the King of Kings. This Advent season, we too should get ready for Jesus. And the first step is to clear the way.

So, how do we clear the way? Obviously, John is talking spiritually, not physically leveling roads. He calls us to clear the way for the coming Savior. Just like building starts with demolition work, we need to tear down whatever is in the way. We need to clear out all of the hinderances in our lives. As Hebrews 12:1 puts it: “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” Demolition always means hauling off and throwing away an astounding amount of debris.

The way John puts it is: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” What exactly is repentance? Ambrose of Milan once said: “True repentance is to cease from sin.”

This is a call to remove all sin from our lives. It is not enough to just shift it around; it needs to be dug out and removed. Just as road construction workers don’t just cut down the trees in the way, they dig them completely out. There is a danger that a tree right by the road can regrow and upend the road surface. In the same way, sins that we keep around keep coming back time and again and upend our spiritual lives.

So, how goes the work of clearing out your life? Have we truly removed all sins from our lives? How often have we come here, confessed sin and then went right back to it? Maybe it is a pet sin that just entangles us too easily. Or it could be a grudge or ill will we bear toward someone else that we keep festering.

How about those things that we should do, but don’t. These sit as holes in our way. How often have we resolved to really put God first in our lives? To take more time for prayer, Bible reading or devotion? To make Bible study a priority and home devotions a priority? But then the problems and business of life get in the way, so we never really change.

It could be some other thing that is missing. Acts of caring for family or others that we never seem to get to, or not as much as we should. Whatever they are, these are holes that need to be filled in.

It is easy to talk about repentance but doing it for real is a different thing. This is why John warned so sternly those who were coming to be baptized: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” It is this dire, to not do so can mean damnation!

Going through the motions is not good enough – God expects real results! We should not expect to just behave Sunday morning, and that’s enough! We are to clear the junk out of our lives; we need some real demolition work done.

So, how do we clear the way?

We simply submit to Christ and live in the new life He has given us. John says that Jesus is coming and “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Often the Bible refers to fire as God’s way of removing impurities; this is even how John describes the destruction of the chaff: “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This would be like how in road construction they build fires to burn the trees that they uprooted.

But notice, the one who is ultimately coming with fire is Jesus.

This would be a very scary thing, except for the vital fact that when Jesus came, He came to take the guilt of our sins away. John the Baptist expected Jesus to come in and clean house, casting out all who lived in any form of sin. What he

didn't expect is that the way Jesus removed sin was not to cast out the sinners, but to take their, our, sin upon Himself. He was the One who had His own life cut down. He was the One who took the fire of God's wrath in our place as He died on the cross.

Now that Jesus has risen from the dead, He gives us forgiveness and life. He makes us His own, baptizing us with the Holy Spirit and fire. He gives us life, real life, in Him. We are now alive in Christ.

We often overlook the fact that repentance is an act of faith. One cannot truly repent of their sins if God had not already given them faith and turned them to Him. Another way to think about this, is that we need to be spiritually alive to repent of our sins, and so we need for God to have made us alive in Christ first. And since God has done that, now we are alive and should act accordingly.

This also means that it is time to get to work, clearing out the rubble of sin in our lives, and filling in the holes. But we do so in faith and trust in Christ. The message of John is not that we had better get our act together to be worthy of Jesus, rather we should live out the faith that we have been given. This is seen in a different metaphor from John: “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” A tree must be alive to bear fruit, in the same way, we must be alive in Christ to repent and remove sin from our lives.

This Advent season, we are preparing not only to remember when Jesus came as the baby of Bethlehem, but also His second coming. When Jesus returns, He will remove all the impurities from this world. This means that He will finally remove the last of the impurities from us.

But how are we to be ready for Jesus' coming? “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.” We are to clear out all of the things in our lives that stand in the way of a stronger, deeper faith in Him.

So, we come and submit to Him all of our lives. This means that we should truly repent, truly turn away from sin. We should take a hard look at our lives and see what needs to be demolished. We need to take serious inventory of what we should be doing but tend not to.

This means looking for what boulders of wickedness remain and dig them out. It means tearing down whatever hills or even mountains of sin that remain in our lives. It means filling in those valleys and holes in our lives. In short, stop doing what we know we shouldn't and start doing what we know we should.

But we do these acts of repentance, knowing that that Jesus has already come to take the guilt of those things away from us. There is no reason to fear that we will be rejected, as long as we have faith in Jesus. But it is also absurd for us to know something is sin, be forgiven for it, and try to keep it. No, we repent. We turn way from our sin, and we turn to God, begging His forgiveness in Christ.

So, let us get to the hard work of clearing the way for Christ's return.
“Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”