

Second Sunday of Advent, Gospel Year C

Jesus, the Smooth, Level, Eternal Road for Sinners

Luke 3:1-6

Second Sunday of Advent

Analysis by James Squire

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*5 Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

Author's Note: Luke wants us to know that the Word of God flies in the face of emperors, governors, rulers, and—gasp—even high priests, if necessary. Zechariah was a temple priest, but he was not in charge. And his son? John's ministry was in the

wilderness, of all places.

The more god-like we imagine ourselves to be, the more useless we are when the Word of God goes looking to get involved in our world. The more we look for it in the seats of power, the more we come up empty.



Jesus rose from the grave, straightening out the crooked people and elevating all those who were laid low in a valley. He became the level playing field on which we all are valued and loved.

DIAGNOSIS: Maintaining the Status Quo, Uneven as It Is

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Protective of Uneven Status Quo

The world is a very uneven place to live in. With the haves up on their hills lording it over the have-nots in the valley, we tend to look toward the seats of power—both secular and religious. But too often, the status quo is firmly entrenched. After all, those who sit there have to climb the hills to get

there, and they are not about to level the playing field out of the goodness of their hearts.

One might expect better out of the spiritual leaders. Alas, in Jesus' time they were forced to make alliances with the secular leaders, whose hills outranked theirs. In the western world, our churches ostensibly have more freedom than that, but with freedom comes the notion of running the church like a business. We succumb to the ways of the world and build our own hills and valleys, even as we comment from the peanut gallery on the hills and valleys in the world outside our doors.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Status Quo as Savior

It's not that emperors and governors and presidents and prime ministers and legislators automatically fleece the populace for all their worth. No, they imagine themselves to be the saviors of the people, if we will just look to them for salvation. The playing field may be crooked (v. 5), but your leaders are watching over everything and will make sure it works out. Just trust us!

The religious establishment too means well, but it also has learned to live in a post-Christian world and tends to adopt the world's ways for organizing itself. So, the church is susceptible to a similar feeling of self-importance. The church ruminates on John's call every Advent, but all too often it fails then to follow John into the wilderness of the world to minister in the valleys. It may strive to invite wilderness dwellers into its warm sanctuary—where sooner or later such denizens are expected to assimilate—but the valley remains the valley and the church remains at a safe distance.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): God as Enemy of Status Quo

That safe distance is not permanent. God's messenger in that wilderness warns that a leveling is coming. The crooked paths that protect us from the wilderness-dwellers will be made straight. The rough roads they would travel to invade our space will be made smooth. They will be empowered. We will lose our power over them, and there might be hell to pay for all the injustice that runs rampant in our world.

PROGNOSIS: Upsetting the Equilibrium to Smooth Things Out



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Succumbs to Power and Defeats It

"Prepare the way of the Lord," says the prophet Isaiah. The world being what it was, and the religious establishment being what it was, people prepared in various ways for Jesus. Each would prepare a path for Jesus they believed would smooth things out for all concerned. The confrontation in Jerusalem was meant to accomplish that.

The powerful tried to level Jesus' impact and smooth out his message. They put him to death to "keep the peace." But Jesus rose from the grave, straightening out the crooked people and elevating all those who were laid low in a valley. He became the level playing field on which we all are valued and loved. (We call this level playing field the Body of Christ.) In Christ's body the mountains we summit to gain respect are made low and the valleys we languish in are filled with grace and mercy to lift our spirits.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Real Salvation Is a Straight, Free, Level Path

We have one path to salvation. It is straight. We need to satisfy no earthly authority to get there. We don't have to navigate any maze to find it. No limits are set on the sinful baggage we are allowed bring on the trip. Jesus makes straight the path and grants us free travel in and through his cross. There are no toll booths or speed limits or sobriety tests or licenses to earn in order to come to him. He even offers to unburden us of our sinful load and receive the gifts of salvation and eternal life. He has cleared away the obstacles for us. Any roadside distractions the world or the institutional church might offer cannot compete with the clear path that Jesus presents. The one who laid himself down to be leveled for us beckons us to make our home on his road. He assures us that it leads to everlasting life—never mind the competing voices.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Crying Out for the Straight, Narrow Path

The world we live in and perhaps even the church denomination(s) we participate in may now appear to have always been the wilderness we thought we were avoiding. After all, their paths still are very crooked and there are still hills and valleys.

Some live in luxury, while others live in poverty. Some “get away with murder,” while others are severely punished for trivial infractions. A voice crying out in the wilderness is still needed.

Those of us who now experience this straight path to Christ and his salvation are sent, like John, into the wilderness to do some Christ-like path-straightening of our own, possibly by laying down our life for those whose lives are diminished by the hills and valleys this world inflicts on them (and the crooked paths our government and our courts and our society make them navigate to find food, employment, acceptance, housing, etc.). Some of us may be gifted with the ability to straighten out the kinks for them, others to cry out in the wilderness on their behalf. Certainly, we can fill their valleys with the grace and mercy of Christ and stand with them in their struggles. And, whether our acts are deemed wise or foolish, everyone will witness the salvation of God (v. 6) in such outreach.