

Road Construction by Holly C. W. Aastuen
Luke 3:1-6 December 6, 2009

How many of you have had to find a new way to or from church due to the construction along Highway 7 at Wooddale? They're making it difficult for some of you, aren't they? We all know that the end result will be good—eliminating the need for a stoplight at Wooddale, but in the meantime for some of us it is a great inconvenience. Even though they are making our roads straighter, sometimes it would be nice if the process of getting there was easier.

My husband has been de-cluttering our house. While I have been writing this sermon, he's been working hard. He's starting on the top level of our house where the bedroom has some things that we had good intentions of going through but never actually did. You know, the sorts of things you put in an out-of-the-way place until you have time to look at it, or the sorts of things you can't bear to throw away, but are not much use for you on a regular basis. Another big category for us is all those things we had intended on filing. Dave has been working through all of that. Already our room is beginning to look bigger and more spacious because of the things he has thrown away.

De-cluttering is a good thing to work on in all of our lives. Not only is it good to de-clutter our homes, it is also good to de-clutter our lives, to de-clutter our emotional baggage, our social and spiritual lives, too. In this season of cluttering up more, or I should say, adding joy to our already busy lives, we need to have our reminders of what is the focus of our time, what is the reason for the season.

When we bring those Christmas decorations out of the closet, we first need to find room for the other stuff that is on our bookshelves, our dining room table, our counters, our floors. Just because Christmas is coming doesn't mean that we don't have a ton of other things around us in our homes. Few of us live with empty spaces that are just waiting to be filled in our homes. Most of us have every available space comfortably if not over-flowingly filled.

And so you get rid of a few things that go down in the basement and then you might as well clean the place where they were and then once everything's clean then, finally, the decorations can go in their place. It's a whole lot of hassle, but in the end, it's worth it.

As busy and full as our houses are, often our lives are even busier. We talk often about how the season of Advent puts a strain on people's schedules as many good opportunities crowd out the time normally used for 'down time' or for regular things like appointments and ordinary tasks.

There are the opportunities like parties and times with friends and family and there are also the joys of shopping and baking and cleaning and preparing for those times of togetherness. For those of us that send out Christmas Cards, there is the additional time writing and addressing and stamping and sending.

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At this time of year our cluttered lives cry out for focus, for simplicity, for clear direction for our hurried and harried lives.

Today's scripture is about a man who was supremely focused. He was focused on God and because of that focus, he preached a message of repentance, of preparation, of turning to God as a way of making the way smoother for the one who was to come after him. John the Baptizer was all about repentance and coming closer to God.

We could do worse than to have that sort of focus in our lives.

We need to take to heart the message of John the Baptizer. We need to make the crooked places in our lives straight, make the rough ways smooth, which isn't saying that we need to be perfect in order to approach God, but is saying that we need to get rid of those distractions, those senses of guilt, those temptations that lure us away from God, that push forward the trivial and crowd out the important.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. We multi-task, seeming to get several different tasks done at once, but none of them are done all that well.

Some of the most successful people do not multi-task. I once heard that former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to the best of her ability, focuses on tasks one at a time. She does one task, completes it, then moves on to the next.

Recent studies show that people like Ms. Rice, who focus on the task at hand do a better job and are more efficient than the person who multi-tasks. In the August publication of the Journal of Experimental Psychology published by the American Psychological Association, they found that time is lost when switching between one task and another and even if the lost time is a matter of a few seconds, such time can even be deadly if the two tasks one is mentally switching between is driving and talking on a cell phone.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy when it comes to focus. One of my greatest challenges in life is wanting to meet the needs and concerns that other people have for my time before meeting the needs and concerns I have. Steven Covey called that 'letting the urgent over shadow the important.' Though there are always things in my life that are both urgent and important, too often I let anything urgent get in the way of the important.

What is it in your life that is the greatest challenge to de-cluttering? What area in your life most needs some attention? Is it your physical space? Is it your schedule? Is it your spirit?

There are times in my life when I am spiritually and mentally focused. I find that focus in Bible Study. I find that focus in devotional reading. I find that focus on spiritual retreats. These moments and hours and sometimes days that I am clear

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about what is important in my life and what is important to pursue for the sake of my goals and for the sake of my spiritual health—those days are a true blessing.

How can we approach the holy season of Christmas and not miss the holy? Where in the coming days can we set aside time for worship and prayer and quiet?

You've had those moments, those days, those times, too when you've known you are where you need to be and doing what you need to do. Christmas Eve is like that for me. All the preparations are done or as done as they're ever going to be, and I can rest in the joy and the assurance that Jesus Christ is born—born to save us, born to deliver us, born to come and live in our hearts.

Let every heart prepare him room.

A goldsmith was once asked by a child how many times he put the gold back into the fire. How many times did he have to re-insert the gold into that hot furnace. He responded that he put it in as many times as it took to take out the impurities. The child responded, "And when do you know you've gotten all the impurities out?" and his response was "When I can see my own face in the gold."

May we return to the fire of the Holy Spirit in our lives enough times so that with its refining heat we may find that Christ's face is reflected in our own, Christ's life reflected in our own.

Un-cluttering our physical, social and spiritual lives would help us with our life's focus on the reason for the season. The process may not be easy, but it will result in fewer roadblocks to our goal, namely, a life with Christ, filled with meaning and purpose. In the end, it will all be worth it.