

Even highways that look straight on a map tend to curve, rise, and fall — gently but persistently. Modern highways are marvels of civil engineering, greater than the famous Roman road network which was the greatest in the world up to the 20th century. But in one way, Roman roads are still more impressive than modern highways.

The Romans made their paths remarkably, obsessively, straight. They hated to detour around any obstacle. If they came to a small hill, they would cut through it. Larger one? Go straight up and down, or maybe build a tunnel. Marsh or river? Build a bridge. They worked far harder than we ever would before giving in and going around an obstacle. But much like our System of Interstate and Defense Highways, Roman roads were built with military applications in mind, built to defend, unite, and control a sprawling mosaic of provinces. They were built to change the world by imposing imperial order. So when Saint Mark chose a quote from the Prophet Isaiah to open his Gospel that, to his audience, would evoke those megaprojects, he chose a quote with provocative implications.

Or two quotes, really. The first half isn't from Isaiah. It appears to be from Exodus 20:23, where Israel is about to enter the Promised Land, and God promises to send a messenger — that is, an angel — ahead of them to prepare their way. That is, by conquering the people who were already in the land, and by enforcing God's sovereign authority over Israel. I say appears to be because another close match is Malachi 3:1, "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." But in a way it doesn't matter, because Malachi himself clearly was drawing on Exodus, for he goes on to proclaim the same theme of preparing for God's world-changing action by repenting from sin and rejecting anything that could distract or confuse us.

So even before his first character appears, just in his epigraph, Mark is making a dramatic statement about where his Gospel is going. God is doing a new thing, yes, and that thing is nothing less than conquering the world. The connection between this introduction and the appearance of John the Baptist seems simple enough. The prophet said someone would be crying out in the wilderness, and here he is! But the situation invites us to consider what it might be like to cry out in the wilderness. By definition, there aren't many people there, so you might expect poor results from that approach. So John the Baptist, never the kind to do anything halfway, made an effort to draw a crowd.

There's a quirk in the Greek that suggests that John was not the naive pastoral figure we tend to assume he was. A more literal translation would say "John was clothing himself," which could mean John was deliberately dressing and acting in ways that would remind his fellow Jews of the prophet Elijah, who was expected to return from heaven to proclaim the arrival of the messiah. You always get more attention when you start with something familiar to your audience, and then you can go on to introduce something new or controversial. So maybe John was engaging in a bit of holy theater

there in the wilderness, helping people to understand that God was fulfilling an ancient promise, but not in a way they might expect.

There's a bit of irony in the scene, which I also think is deliberate. Mark's quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures suggest a grand, sweeping triumph, as does the term "good news," which had the connotation of a military victory. But he highlights a tension within the prophecy, where the victory is preceded not by legions marching in formation, but by a single messenger, a lone voice. John's location, dress, and diet are rugged and idiosyncratic, and his message is one of humility before God. All this would seem to promise that the victory we will see play out will not be a conventional one, and indeed will subvert our very notions of power and triumph.

Which is all very interesting or, at least, I hope so, but we could fairly ask, so what? Yes, the story unfolds with Jesus's passion and death shown to be a great victory, fulfilling the implicit promise of a subversive ending. And yes, popular notions of power and triumph need critical reflection in every age. But John the Baptist's message wasn't nearly so much about theory and criticism as it was about radical changes in our own lives, because that's the best preparation for God's arrival.

We don't like to think about our sins very much, so we need someone like John the Baptist to get our attention and shake us up. And more than that, we need more than a momentary shakeup. John wasn't engaged in ministry to offer a momentary diversion, but to make enduring changes in his congregation, a permanent re-orientation away from the world and toward God. So while he might have been living closer to nature than most people would ever be comfortable with, in a spiritual sense, John was a master civil engineer.

He was not content for people to detour around their sins, to be generally pleasant people who accepted or denied their faults. No, he was determined to build bridges over complacency, level out materialism and blast tunnels through pride. May we continue the work in the wilderness of our own souls, to make ready for God's arrival in triumph.

Now is the time to think big, to let the zeal and faithfulness of prophets and saints give us holy ambition. Now is the time to put on our hip waders, work boots and hard hats, and start on the megaprojects in our souls, taking risks and pressing on with determination to get big things done. Human souls may seem poor material to work with, but God honors them by choosing them and hallows them by dwelling within them.

Specifically, as John promised, the Holy Spirit is with us to help us do what we never could do on our own; she is more powerful than our wills, our abilities, our shortcomings, and, thank God, she is also far more powerful than our sins. But the Spirit doesn't act where she is not invited and continually welcome. So this Advent, take time to get re-acquainted with the Holy Spirit. Spend time with her. Invite her into conversation, and listen closely to what she has to say. She will guide you to know what to do to prepare God's way, and help you to accomplish your calling. In so doing, she

will reveal anew that the way of God is the way of grace. And through our improved souls, God will change the world.