

Second Sunday of Advent

Year C

Bar 5:1-9

Ps 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

Phil 1:4-6, 8-11

Lk 3:1-6

Francis J. Caponi, O.S.A.

As every student of history knows, and as everyone who has traveled in Europe can still see firsthand, the Romans were great builders of roads. The roads held their empire together, the roads spread Roman civilization and the *Pax Romana* across three continents. From London to Dover, from Cadiz to the Pyrenees and on into France, across the Alps from Venice and Milan into Switzerland and Germany, the Romans built roads that are still used today.

The object of Roman road building was the shortest, easiest trip, and the means were straight roads: roads over which armies could move swiftly, roads over which commerce could flow easily, roads that brought the word of the Senate and the Emperor from the Eternal City to the smallest village in the darkest wood in the farthest outpost of the empire. To look at a map of Roman roads is to look at the veins of civilization, the sluices of earthly power.

But in that far off year, the word of God did not come to the master of the roads, the emperor Tiberius. The word of God did not come to Pontius Pilate, the emperor's representative in Judea. The word of God did not come to Herod or Philip or Lysanais, the local rulers appointed by the master of the roads. The word of God came to John, a man not of the roads but of the deserts, a man living beyond paved paths, wandering in a waste over which no army could cross and through which no merchants would travel. John was literally an "off track man," a prophet from a world without milestones or way stations.

And the word of God which came to John said this: The maps are about to change. Where once there were insurmountable mountains, soon the earth will be flat. Where once there were inaccessible valleys, soon the earth will be full. Where once roads snaked back and forth around irresistible stones and immovable hills, now the highways will be snapped straight. There will be no more cliffs, no crags, no slopes.

John the Baptist proclaims that God intends to outdo the Romans. They could do no more than lay roads in the midst of mountain passes and thick woods. But the days are coming when the whole world will be a road, when a highway will not be the exception but the rule, when every road of gravel and concrete and stone will look crude and arduous in comparison with the smooth deserts and the level fields.

But why? Can it be a good thing for the whole world to be a road? No more mountains - neither Rockies nor Poconos? No more hills - neither Bunker Hill nor Capitol Hill nor Sharon Hill? Deserts may be inhospitable for most of us, but are they not possessed of a special beauty? Valleys may be deep and hard to cross, but do their recesses and tangles not add to the wonder of the earth? What of the peerless beauty of the Grand Canyon and the marvel of the Matterhorn? Is John's proclamation in fact a curse fulfilled in our hearing, as clanking progress signals another piece of the world paved under? Do we not see around us the Baptist's vision come horribly true, as roads and parking lots and sidewalks all alike make the world ever more conveniently smooth, and ever less interesting, ever less beautiful?

The whole world a road - can this be good news? Will God who made the earth round now make it flat? Will God who gave the ground great waves of texture, "age-old depths and gorges," now pull the land tight as a sheet? "Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth..." This sounds convenient - but can it be beautiful? What of the divine majesty of distant mountains, or the mysterious power of the rolling deserts which gave birth to the Baptist himself? Will all this be undone, and the whole world become a vast highway, a global route 95?

The more we wonder, the clearer it becomes that John is not talking about roads at all. He is talking about the human heart. He is talking about our souls. Such twisting, turning paths there are in every human heart as to make the steepest, stoniest mountain trail seem a surveyor's dream. Such sin-choked valleys and prideful mountains mar the landscape of our souls as to make an earthly engineer quake at the impossible grades and unbridgeable depths that lie within us. The Romans set down roads across the Alps and through the marshes and deserts of North Africa. But their roads, and their gods, were powerless against the depths and crags of human sin. A man could move swiftly down those roads, but at journey's end he would still be stuck in his sin, immobile in his pride, not an inch closer to God than when he set out.

John proclaims that God will outdo the Romans. They laid roads in the midst of mountain passes and thick woods, roads that outlasted their empire, roads still in use today. But God will lay a road into every human heart. John the Baptist has come to start clearing the ground, to wield the axe and the sickle, to call men and women to repentance. John proclaims that God Himself is coming to deal with the marshes and deserts and mountains of the human heart. John proclaims that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," because Jesus Christ is close at hand, and between his good news of salvation and every human heart there will be no rough ground, no broken bridge, no winding path to leave the pilgrim footsore and in despair of the journey's end. Christ is the master roadbuilder, who surveys the ground of each human heart and pushes aside every obstacle and flattens every obstruction. When his roads are done, none of us will be far from him, none of us will be prevented by mountains or valleys from following him. Christ's mercy will make our hearts smooth, Christ's forgiveness will make our confused thoughts straight, Christ's obedience and sacrifice and suffering and death will challenge every roadblock that our vanity and pride can erect.

Why else do we put up a crucifix in every church, if not that Christians may see how far Christ's love goes, and so let that love overcome the rough ground of fear? Why else put up a Nativity scene, if not that Christians may see how far God's love goes, to casting off his glory and being born in a stable, and so let that love make a track through the jungle thickness of anger, selfishness, envy, and greed? Why else come among us again and again under the signs of bread and wine, if not that Christ may feed our weary pilgrim hearts and move us by his example to feed the hungry in our midst?

This Advent, God has begun a good work in us, the work of a roadbuilder for whom no heart is impassable. In this book and on that altar, God lays out the plans and the tools. The building is painful. Sin, like stones in a farmer's field, must be dug up, hauled out, and tossed aside. Grace, like a road, requires excavation. It is not easy to build a road in the rough terrain of the human heart - not easy on the builder, who died in order to complete the work, and not easy on us, who must die to our sinful selves if we wish to travel the road and see the salvation of God.

This is our joy and our hope: Christ does not only build the road, he travels it. He makes our way smooth and straight, then he comes down that road and takes us up and walks by our

side. He who was born and lived and died with us travels with us still. This is what makes the road straight and wide, this is what makes the mountains flat and the valleys full, this is what truly makes the twisting roads straight: we do not travel alone. God is with us.