

Clearing a Path

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from Christ Jesus our Lord, the one for whom we will clear every path. Amen.

We saw our first real snow of the year this past week. And it was no surprise to see that a large chunk of Western Pennsylvanians who have lived in Western Pennsylvania their entire lives somehow forgot to drive in the snow in the last nine months or so.

Tuesday evening, the evangelism committee at Mount Calvary met at the church, and as the snow had been falling on and off all afternoon, it was slick going to the meeting, and even worse coming home an hour later. When I texted my wife to tell her I was on my way home, she responded telling me to take my time, to be careful, and to take 219 home rather than the backroad shortcut I normally take between Richland and our home in Davidsville.

Frankly, 219 wasn't in great shape at that hour either, but I followed two snowplows working in tandem the whole way from the Scalp Avenue exit to the Davidsville exit. It was slow-going, it took almost twice as long to get home as it normally would, and I listened on my fire department radio as wrecks and disabled vehicles were announced all over the county for the rest of the evening, but eventually I did make it home.

Wednesday morning, a little over twelve hours later, the roads had a few slick spots, but you could tell plow operators had done their work to make the roads safe. And by Thursday, there were plenty of places all around us where you could hardly tell it had snowed it all.

And that is exactly what winter in Western Pennsylvania seems to be most years. A storm that will dump a ton of snow in a short amount of time, and then the snow melts.

I can remember one particular storm in seminary that dumped an entire foot of snow overnight on a weekend where pastors from all over the country were supposed to be traveling to campus. The snow lasted for long enough to cancel the travel plans of most of the visitors, but a warm front coming in right after the storm melted almost all of the snow in just a few hours. The snow was gone by the start of the event that all of the people were supposed to be coming for.

The same thing happens multiple times each winter when a morning or afternoon storm clogs highways during "rush hour" and creates headaches for thousands of people, only to clear up just a while later.

And in all of these cases, the snowplows are still out working.

Never does someone in an office at PennDOT look at the weather forecast and say "oh, that six inches will melt by tomorrow, we don't actually need to plow it." They do the work to clear the path no matter what.

As we enter into the second week of Advent, this season in which we await the coming of Christ, our focus this week found in each of the readings calls us to prepare, to be ready. And

not just garden-variety ready, but we hear again and again the image of clearing a path, making a road, ensuring that nothing gets in the way of the arrival of Christ.

And I think it's worth it to think about what the things are in our lives that clutter the path to Jesus. What are the things that make it more treacherous, more cumbersome, more difficult to connect with our faith?

In the past nine months, as we've had to again and again adjust to different ways of connecting with and living out our faith, I think we can all agree that at times, the path between us and God has gotten a little difficult. At times, we've allowed the trail to become a bit overgrown. At times, we've allowed a bit too much snow to accumulate on the roads.

Maybe that looks like adjusting a bit too much to the convenience of not having to plan to attend worship.

Maybe that looks like allowing a negative outlook on world events to shade our ability to see the goodness in the world.

Maybe that looks like forgetting about the true meaning of Easter a few months back, or the true meaning of Christmas in just a few weeks.

Nine months ago when COVID-19 started really effecting the daily lives of people all throughout the country, so many of us thought things along the lines of "if we can just make it through these next few weeks, we'll be fine."

So many churches, and businesses, and organizations, and individuals, made short-sighted decisions thinking that this would all be wrapped up in a few weeks. Kind of like a snow-plow driver looking at a weather forecast and saying to themselves "I don't need to do any plowing today, it will melt by tomorrow."

But the thing is, for as much as Western Pennsylvania winters often have those short one or two day storms, sometimes there are bigger long ones. Those times where it's not really a storm, but maybe it stays cold for a couple weeks in a row, and maybe we add another inch or two of snow every other day.

If at the beginning of that cold snap, the snow plow drivers had all simply said, "hey, let's just wait for this to go away..." A lot of people would be in trouble before too long. People wouldn't be able to get to work. Kids wouldn't be able to get to school. Ambulances wouldn't be able to get to hospitals.

And so as much as the temptation may be there to look at obstacles in our path and say "I'll wait for that to disappear on its own," sometimes we have to take the bull by its horns, sometimes we have to do the heavy lifting.

Sometimes we have to clear the path ourselves.

So think back a few minutes. What were those things that you thought of when I asked you to imagine the obstacles in your path? And how can you clear them?

How can you do as much as possible right here, right now, to clear the way for Jesus to make a straight path into your life?

John the Baptizer, John the Baptist, gives us some ideas: we need to repent. We need to turn back toward God and back toward our Baptism. We need to confess to God the things that we have allowed to clutter the path, and then we need to push them right out of the way.

Because the one who is all-powerful, and all-loving is coming.

Even in spite of all the chaos of the world, even in spite of all the stumbling blocks and obstacles and barricades and slippery slopes that we may find along the pathway, the divine son of God is able to navigate all of that. If only we do the work to meet him in the middle.

If only we do the work to not sit back and wait for the world to change, but rather blaze a new trail.

THAT is what Christ would want us to do in a time like this. Clear a path, not just to connect ourselves to God, but to ensure that as many others can be connected as well.

So, let's put on our boots, let's go out into the cold and clear the path so that all can welcome Jesus into their hearts and homes this Advent. Thanks be to God. Amen.