

Matthew 3:1-12

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"The Forty Day Workout"
Ash Wednesday
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Text: *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*
Matt. 3:3

When I saw the three simple lightening rods on top of the little country church, which I served in Iowa, the thought occurred to me how comforting it is we rely on something so simple, a concept so reliable, and an invention so old in this age of high technological complexity, that we use it to protect our buildings. The only proof I had of its trustworthy record was that insurance companies gave our church a lower rate for having it installed. The principle behind the lightning rod, of course, is not to prevent lightning from striking, but to provide for the bolt of energy the path of least resistance. The lightning strikes the rod high on the roof, travels through a cable securely staked to the ground, and stays away from the structure of the building.

The path of the least resistance applies to other forms of the natural world as well. Water flows through the easiest channels first. Animals of the forest will make paths leading up and down the gentlest hills and valleys of their regions. In biblical days, because of their lack of machinery and earth moving equipment, the paths and roads of Palestine were often narrow and wound around all over the landscape. The people of those times created roadways that offered the least resistance. What may have been one mile as the crow flies would have been three miles by road.

I have to hand it to our modern generations. We have been industrious and tireless in our efforts to make straight roadways for ourselves. Through hard work and diligence, we have built major metropolitan centers, gone to the moon several times, explored the depths of the oceans, and have created a society unequalled in history. But, we have problems too. Often times, the magnitude of our successes seems to be matched by our failures. Crime plagues the metropolitan centers we've built. Technology rules the heart and mind. Instant gratification and material gain have become our spiritual partners. Abuses of chemical stimulants gives us a new and

altogether horrible fantasy among the ever increasing anxieties of our modern age. When faced with all this, people like us tend to roll up our sleeves, dig in, and hope that more hard work will begin to solve some of our problems.

I know for a fact that even most everyone in this congregation does work hard. We have grown up and are a part of a community with a strong work ethic. This, I believe, is generally good. Keep it up, until it becomes your god. Many times we are so busy in our daily industrious efforts to provide for our families and ourselves that we take the path of least resistance in one of the most important areas of our lives. This being, I believe, our faith life. We drive hard and straight ahead to make career advancements, but the course of our faith is chosen not so much by where we want our spiritual selves to go, but where the influences of life push us. Sometimes our faith turns and twists and winds around and around like the roads of old Palestine.

The path of least resistance for a person's faith may be to choose attending a football game instead of church, or sleeping in late instead of teaching Sunday School. Church is for us, obviously, not difficult to attend seeing we have chosen to give up a Wednesday night at home to be here. But, reaching out in ministry to a lonely elderly person may cause us to fear and change our course. The discipline of daily prayer has caused many to stop short and double back for fear of what God may will for our lives. Countless life examples can be shared to describe what deviates our spiritual lives and causes our faith to meander "willy nilly" - here and there - without much meaning or direction. I will leave it up to you to evaluate your own life, as we all have to do, to find solutions instead of excuses for getting back on the path of God's will. I'm reminded of a young boy who was helping his grandfather dig up potatoes. After a while, the youngster began to tire. "*Grandpa,*" he asked wearily, "*what ever made you bury these things anyway?*" In like manner, it may be a weary, but altogether worthy search on our parts to discover what obstacles we will have to dig up and remove to straighten and strengthen our faith lives. It will not hurt to remember that some of these obstacles we may have even planted ourselves. We have the power to remove them.

Building a strong faith life is tough. As I have stated earlier, we have many distractions in our lives which push and pull us hither and yonder beyond the scope of God's will for our lives. Jesus

comments on this several times. At least two familiar parables tell of one's choice between the right path and the path of least resistance. The man with only one talent feared risking it so he took the easiest way and buried it for safe keeping (Matt. 25:24-26). Likewise, we learn it will be easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 19:24). Jesus is telling us we will have to make difficult choices with our lives, endure the consequences of tough decisions, and even take some risks in order that we might strengthen our faith.

In present times we need to bolster our faith, don't we? Sometimes we are forced to face obstacles of great challenge and cannot choose the path of least resistance. It is terrible to be caught short on faith when crisis grapples with our hearts and minds. Our country, now at war, is in such a crisis. Many people are concerned and groping for answers. Proof of this is found in our average church attendance which has increased by fifty-five per Sunday since the first of the year; just when the conflict began heating up for war. In times like these we are less likely to seek the easy faith and more likely to struggle and find where God is leading us in this dilemma. This is good, because we need God's help, but it is too bad we have to be consistently reeled back to the straight and narrow by the force of crisis. How encouraging it would be for the future of God's Kingdom if our love and devotion for God were all we deemed necessary to keep us on the path of his will.

About a year ago my wife and I decided to get in better physical shape, so we bought an aerobics video which claimed to be a winning workout. I didn't think I would have too much trouble keeping up with a bunch of people dancing on the floor to a jazzy beat. After all, years ago, I hiked all over the Porcupine Mountains with a seventy pound backpack and before that patrolled with Airborne Rangers throughout Forts McCoy and Riley. About five minutes into the aerobic dancing, however, I found myself gasping for breath and thinking about faking an injury so I could quit. It was tough. If I wanted to be in shape, I was going to have to work for it. For various and sundry reasons, I have since taken the path of least resistance and find myself, more often than not, relaxing in my easy chair when I should be exercising.

At this moment, we stand on the threshold of Lent. A marvelous opportunity. A forty day spiritual workout. And fortunately we don't always have to do it alone. Our church has

activities planned that include the men's Lenten breakfast, the Lenten pot-luck dinners followed by a program and an evening Bible study on the Beatitudes. And, I remind you, this is all before holy week. Another way to begin a new journey in faith is to follow our daily Lenten devotional which provides a scripture, a meditation, and a prayer. Most importantly would be for all of us to increase the discipline of our own prayer. In this way we can build and strengthen and renew our personal relationship with God.

Whenever the King of the land would travel in old Palestine, runners would be a day or two ahead of him crying out from town to town, *"Prepare ye the way of the King, make his paths straight."* All the able bodied towns people would then rush in a flurry of work on the roadway that led into town and out of town. They would straighten and make comfortable their road. No longer would it be the path of least resistance, but a new and proper road with few curves and bumps. It took some effort and some doing, if you can imagine. In those days a road was made by hard labor. They had little technology and no machines with which to do the work. While making it easier for the King to enter their town, they had to suffer the hardships of road construction done by hand.

What did John mean when he quoted Isaiah? *"Prepare ye the the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* Maybe he was telling us to strengthen our faith; be prepared for the coming Messiah. Indeed, the message of Jesus Christ will be much easier to hear and bear if we are prepared for it. I don't think I speak only for myself by admitting I would like to have the kind of spiritual qualities that make it easier for the Messiah to enter into my heart and be a part of my life. By choosing God's will to help make that path easier, we can be ever closer to leading Christ like lives. Tonight we gather as one body at the table of our Lord, let us make this a golden opportunity to strengthen our faith in God's mighty work and open the door to our hearts so that we might never again live without God's love permanently instilled in our lives. By clearing away the stumbling blocks of selfishness and sin, we can make God's journey into our souls an easy one. Let us get to work. It is Lent and we are called to create for God the path of least resistance to our hearts. *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."* Amen.