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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, I want begin this sermon today by talking about a Greek word, you may or may not heard before.

The word is *parousia*.

Parousia. Spelled P-A-R-O-U-S-I-A.

It is a term that means “presence” or “arrival.”

And this term derives not from the religious sphere.

Parousia did not originate from the vocabulary of the early Church nor from the vocabulary of the ancient synagogue.

No, *parousia* was a secular term.

You see, in ancient Roman society, when a high Roman official, such as the emperor, visited a city in a province...

When any elite Roman, any Roman of high political stature visited a town in some rural district, it was a *parousia*.

Again, *parousia* means “presence” or “arrival.”

So, let’s just imagine for a moment that this great state of Pennsylvania is the ancient Roman Empire.

And the seat of the empire is Harrisburg.

As Rome was the capital of the ancient Empire, so we will imagine that Harrisburg is the capital in our scenario.

And it so happens that the Emperor residing in Harrisburg decides to make a tour of a portion of his empire.

Emperors would do this on occasion to rally their citizenry around themselves.

And upon his visit, the Emperor would receive gifts and tributes, but would also listen to the needs of the various peoples he visited.

So, imagine in our scenario that the Emperor is going to visit several small towns north of Harrisburg including the towns of Gratz and Pillow, Klingerstown and Erdman.

I only name these towns because I had become familiar with them during my first call as a pastor.

But imagine if you will, how the people of say the small town of Klingerstown might respond if they knew the Emperor was going to be making a visit.

The residents of Klingerstown no doubt would proceed to spruce up their town, in order to make it ready to receive the Emperor.

They might put a fresh coat of paint on their buildings.

They might hang banners welcoming the Emperor.

They might do a bit of landscaping in areas which have become a bit of an eyesore.

And those same residents might even, might even do a little road repair.

Certainly they would want to fill in any potholes.

Certainly they would want to do some paving where necessary.

In short, they would want to make the Emperors entry into their town as comfortable and inviting as possible.

Indeed, one Biblical scholar describes the events surrounding a *parousia* saying, "On the occasion of visits by the Emperor or high officials there are flattering speeches, delicacies to eat, asses for the baggage, STREET IMPROVEMENTS, and wreaths or gifts of money. These are paid for by voluntary contributions or, if necessary, unpopular levies (in other words, taxes). Under the empire the ceremonies were even more magnificent and visits were marked by new buildings, the institution of holy days, etc. Complaints and requests are customarily addressed to rulers on such visits."

And among all those details I just noted, of particular interest is the mention of “street improvements.”

Why I draw our attention to this detail is because it resonates with what we hear in our gospel reading for today.

“Prepare the way of the Lord, makes his paths straight.”

“Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

PAUSE

So what is going on here in Luke, chapter 3...

What is going on here is nothing short of a *parousia*.

Only, it is NOT some high official making a visit.

It is NOT the Emperor who is making a call.

No, Luke is NOT describing the welcome prepared for some political figure of the Roman higher echelon.

No, this is a description of an altogether different *parousia*.

Luke is describing God himself coming in all his glory.

This is the *parousia* of God.

So, you better bet the people need to spruce up the town.

And you better bet the people need to prepare the road for God’s entry into this world.

We thought President Biden had a tough go at passing the trillion dollar Infrastructure Bill to improve bridges and roads, and update our nation’s infrastructure.

In comparison, imagine all that is needed for preparing the way for the Lord, namely the improvements needed for the road God will travel.

Leveling gigantic mountains.

Filling in enormous valleys.

Straightening curves.

And smoothing the road surface.

Yes, the Gospel writer Luke in this passage this morning uses this text from Isaiah, and in using this text, Luke no doubt has in mind the image of a *parousia*, but a *parousia* far exceeding that of the Emperor or other high official visiting some rural town.

This is the *parousia* of God.

PAUSE

But, where pray tell, are the road improvements being made?

Where, pray tell, is this superhighway by which we welcome God?

In short, how is it that we prepare the way of the Lord?

PAUSE

Well, today, sisters and brothers in Christ, at this very hour, here in worship, we will witness again those road improvements that accompany the *parousia* of God.

Today, we will observe how it is that we prepare the way of the Lord.

For God's superhighway is none other than the baptismal font.

The superhighway, the way by which God comes to us his people is by the ritual of baptism.

No, the superhighway of God is not some major interstate like I-95.

No, the superhighway of God is not some 8-lane expressway.

No, the superhighway of God is not a paved road, nor some asphalt throughway, nor some macadam parkway.

No, the superhighway of God is the sacrament of Holy Baptism.

For God, we see, travels by grace into our lives.

By grace God arrives. By grace God is present.

By grace God's *parousia* comes to fruition, comes to be.

But the truth is, by grace in baptism we not only welcome God into our lives, but God welcomes us into salvation.

PAUSE

And this is what John the Baptist, that herald of our Lord...this is what John the Baptist was doing thousands of years ago out in the wilderness.

This is what John the Baptist was doing when he was baptizing people by the River Jordan.

John was doing "*parousia*."

He was preparing the way of the Lord, so the Lord could come into the lives of people, and so that people could come to salvation.

This is what John was doing; this is what he was doing long, long ago, in land far, far away.

John the Baptist was doing "*parousia*."

Now, the Gospel writer Luke tells us as much.

Luke tells us that the word of God came to John in the wilderness, and John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in Isaiah.

John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John was preparing the way of the Lord.

Yes, sisters and brothers in Christ, baptism is the way by which God comes to us his people, and it is the way by which we are received by God and come to know salvation in Christ.

PAUSE

Today, we witness again the *parousia* of God.

Today, we witness the *parousia* of God in the baptism of Jaylen Copeland.

God arrives in Jaylen's life today.

God is present in Jaylen's life today.

We know this to be true because of Jaylen's baptism.

And WE...we are REMINDED then of our own baptism.

WE are REMINDED today as well that God has arrived in our lives, that God is present in our lives.

Yes, the coming of God at this time in the season of Advent...

The coming of God in Advent is simply a reminder of our baptism into Christ, when the Lord had come into our lives.

God's *parousia* does not take place along some physical road the Lord travels.

No, God's *parousia* is a spiritual road that leads to our hearts.

I should qualify that statement somewhat, for there actually is a physical road, a physical sign.

For in truth, baptism is the physical road, but it is but a physical sign of what God is doing and has already been doing spiritually in our lives.

For I believe God is already present in our lives even before baptism.

God has arrived in our lives even before we come to the baptismal font.

Nonetheless, baptism is that visible reminder, that physical sign of God's ongoing grace toward his people.

So God's grace happens even apart from baptism, but God institutes baptism why? Well, because we humans need a visible sign.

We humans like a physical reminder of God's grace, we can fall back on.

And so, baptism is that for us.

In baptism, we are acknowledging with the sign of water and the word that God is already active in Jaylen's life, is already present with him, has already bestowed upon him His grace.

And so, baptism is a physical reminder of God's grace.

And so, if we ever need to be reminded of God's presence, God's forgiveness, God's grace...we can always return to our baptism.

That is what John the Baptist was declaring when he was proclaiming a baptism OF REPENTANCE.

Repentance conveys the sense of returning.

Repentance conveys the sense of going back again and again.

Literally, the word "repentance" means turning around to go in the right direction again.

Baptism is the road we are to return to continually. That is why Luther said, "Every time you wash your face remember your baptism."

Remember your baptism. Return to your baptism. For it is the ever-present reminder of God's grace.

PAUSE

Yes, baptism is the way we prepare for God's *parousia*.

We repent, we turn again to our baptism, knowing that we are forgiven by God, that we are claimed by God, and that we are empowered by God's Spirit.

Baptism is God's superhighway, where God comes to us, and where we receive the salvation of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.