

CAN YOU Dig It?
Sermon, December 9, 2018
Second Sunday of Advent
Texts: Luke 1:58-79; 3:1-8; Philippians 1:3-11

The Emergency Broadcast System was established in 1963 (*just after the Cuban missile crisis*) to provide the federal government with an expeditious method of communicating with the American public in the event of an attack, a threat of war, or some other grave national crisis. Stringent safeguards were developed to prevent false alarms, including sealed sets of updated authenticator code words sent on a regular basis to every broadcast facility in the United States. Despite all the elaborate safeguards, however, at 9:33 AM on February 20, 1971 the real Emergency Broadcast System was accidentally activated nationwide. It's a bit complicated to explain, but basically it was during a routine test of the system that a teletype operator inserted the wrong tape and as a result, an actual Emergency Broadcast System activation message authenticated with the proper code words was sent through the entire system, ordering television and radio stations nationwide to cease regular programming and broadcast the alert calling people to **prepare and get ready** for a national emergency. This false alarm demonstrated major flaws in the system, not the least of which was that the vast majority of the stations that received the alert either ignored it, or did not know what to do during an actual emergency!

Some people ... many in fact ... have a tendency to not take warnings to "prepare and get ready" seriously. There are various reasons why; for example, we may not think the warning applies to us, or sometimes we may think those giving such warnings are, perhaps, a little too zealous or alarmist and are just going over the top (*I think just about every decade I've been alive there has been some apocalyptic warning that the world will not survive another ten years due to overpopulation or pollution or global warming or global cooling or rising oceans or wayward asteroids and so on*), and sometimes experience has taught us that some warnings to prepare and get ready really can be ignored.

A more recent example took place January 13, 2018. A false alert was issued in Hawaii via the Emergency Alert System over television, radio, and cell phones calling the people to prepare and get ready. The alert read, in all capitals (*which in text speak is interpreted as SHOUTING*): "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL." The message was sent at 8:07 a.m. local time; needless to say, it caused panic and disruption throughout the state, especially in light of the recent tensions with North Korea at the time. A second message was sent 38 minutes later, describing the first as a "false alarm," but it was a bit late to prevent pandemonium. State officials blamed a miscommunication at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (HEMA). Hawaii's governor publicly apologized, and the FCC and the Hawaii House of Representatives launched investigations into the incident, leading to the resignation of the state's emergency management administrator.

Even more recently, but somewhat less sensational: Wednesday, October 3, 2:18 p.m. cell phones across the United States were buzzing and vibrating in unison with a special text message with the startling subject line "PRESIDENTIAL ALERT." I was in the car at the time, so I pulled over ASAP to see what this was about! The text below the subject line read: "*THIS IS A TEST of the National Wireless Emergency Alert System. No action is needed.*" The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was conducting a test of the new Wireless Emergency Alert system that allows "presidential alerts" to cell phones warning residents of national emergencies. Some of you may have read or heard that FEMA was just besieged with complaints soon thereafter; apparently some didn't like being the involuntarily receivers of such warnings. Given President Trump's proclivity to tweet, the idea of the President's having control over a nationwide wireless alert system was apparently unsettling to those who complained to FEMA. However, officials assured there are specific and stringent guardrails in place to make sure the system is used correctly: — the President just can't send a message to every cell phone in the nation saying something like, "*Tornado Warnings across the Midwest, and the Mueller investigation is a WITCH HUNT.*"

I thought of all this when studying the lectionary texts for this second Sunday of Advent, readings which focus on the Advent role of John the Baptist calling people to "prepare and get ready." You might say John was the Emergency Broadcast/Alert System of God to alert the people of Israel the Messiah was on His way, so get ready! John is calling on the people to prepare, to get ready, by repenting and submitting their ways to God's ways, their priorities to God's priorities, their ethics to God's ethics, their purposes to God's purposes. The long awaited Lord is about to come! Some responded, but many didn't ... then and now. Again, some just don't take divine warnings to prepare seriously. Some don't think the spiritual warnings apply to them. Still others perhaps were thinking the one giving the warning was a little over the top; this was from a too zealous alarmist and/or fanatic, so they ignored it.

So, "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar ... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him ...'*" The Lord is coming!

Prepare the way for him! Do what it takes to straighten out what's crooked, do what it takes to make smooth the rougher places in your lives, in your communities. The warning is both an imperative and a promise: The imperative: Do what it takes to dig out, fill up, flatten out and bulldoze away all the sinful obstacles that may impede the way of the Lord. The promise: It'll happen with you or without you! *"Every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked ways will be made straight and the rough places will be made plain."* This is not primarily "should" language, this is primarily "shall" language. It's going to happen! This speaks of something of a grand excavation project in order to prepare the holy highway ... or as I like to think of it, the holy higher-way ... for God. As we read in our Call to Worship from Psalm 85: *"Righteousness will go before Him and will make a path for His steps."*

Speaking of grand excavation projects (*and I talked about this six years ago when we last looked at these lectionary passages*), the grand excavation that has the dubious honor of being *the* most expensive and largest highway construction project ever in the history of the United States was the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, otherwise known as the Big Dig. This was the megaproject in nearby Boston that rerouted the Central Artery (Interstate 93) into the then-new 3.5-mile Tip O'Neill tunnel. The project also included the construction of the Ted Williams Tunnel to Logan Airport, the avant-garde Zakim Memorial Bridge over the Charles River, and the Rose Kennedy Greenway in the space vacated by the previous I-93 elevated roadway. The ground was originally broken in 1991, and the project was scheduled to be completed in 1998 at an estimated cost of \$2.8 billion. The project was not completed, however, until December 2007, nine-plus years late, and even then a number of complications necessitating rework and repair continued well into 2013. The Boston Globe estimated the project ultimately cost \$24.3 billion (*that's just twenty two billion dollars or so off the original estimate ... not bad for government work!*) which will not be paid off until at least 2038. Congressman Barney Frank famously said it probably would have been cheaper to raise the entire city instead of lowering the road. All in all, according to one source, the Big Dig cost roughly three times what it cost to build the Panama Canal, in constant dollars! The Big Dig was plagued by escalating costs, scheduling overruns, thousands of leaks, design flaws, charges of poor execution and use of substandard materials, criminal arrest, and at least one death, when on July 10, 2006, a 20 X 40 foot three ton concrete ceiling panel fell on a car, tragically killing the female passenger. In March 2011 a maintenance crew found a 120 lb. light fixture lying in the middle of the northbound travel lane in the O'Neill tunnel. A comprehensive inspection revealed numerous other light fixtures were in a similar state of deterioration; many were temporarily secured with plastic ties until it was decided in 2012 that all of the twenty-five THOUSAND light fixtures in the tunnel had to be replaced at an estimated cost of \$54 million, which took two years to complete (2013). What was first projected as a seven year, two billion dollar venture eventually turned into a twenty-three year and nearly twenty-five billion dollar boondoggle!

The prophet called the people to excavate and build a "road" for the coming King. This was not a literal road of asphalt or concrete, but a high way, a *high-er* way, built out of intentional acts of righteousness and repentance. Do what you can in your lives, your homes, your communities, your world to straighten out what is crooked, remove the obstacles of injustice, excavate the dirt and sludge of sin, level out the pits and valleys of unfilled good intentions, blast away the mountains of self-righteousness and selfish living, and so on! Are we doing this? Are we doing what it takes to lay this higher-way of the Lord in our lives and in our world? This is the *real* Big Dig. Don't be like the federal, state and city planners who grossly underestimate the immensity of the task ... this grand excavation and preparation will take MUCH more than we may think; it is the work of a lifetime! The more we attempt to start doing things right, the more we "dig," the more we realize there is yet to be done. We realize more and more how we don't measure up even to our own standards, let alone His. As we grow in faith, we see more and more just how much work there is to do! It's a real big dig that takes a lifetime and even more!

But the good news is that we don't have to do this "dig" alone!

"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain." Again, this is an imperative *and* a promise... a promise that this work WILL be done, and (*as the choir sang earlier from Handel's Messiah*) the Glory of the Lord *shall* be revealed and all flesh *shall* see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken! Yes, we are to do what we can to "prepare the way," but ultimately, this Big Dig will be God's doing! In this grand excavation of the "holy higher-way", it is God Who will ultimately finish this; as mentioned last week, part of the Advent hope is that God will finish what He started ... that is true for you and me and it is true for all creation. This grand excavation of the holy higher-way is a joint project between God and His people! As Paul writes to the Philippians: *"I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."*

So ... and here's where my lingering adolescence from the sixties kicks in with this corny sermon title ... "Can YOU dig it?" Well, the answer is yes, but not by yourself! It is God who began the good work in you and me, it is God who is still at work in you and me, and it is God Who will continue to work in us and through us until He is done! The grand Advent hope is that God will bring this Big Dig of salvation to completion, preparing us all to fully receive Him at the Day of Jesus Christ, when *"... the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."*