Eminent Domain


A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015.

Thirty miles south of the Washington D.C. Beltway is Stafford, VA, a bedroom community for our nation’s capital. My wife and I have dear friends who live in Stafford. “Dear friends” is an understatement. A better term is “family,” which is not always blood-kin. I’m honored that my extended family, John and Margy Carlson, join us in worship this morning and will accompany me for the afternoon performance of Handel’s Messiah.

For thirteen years, I have driven Courthouse Road, also known as Highway 630, in Stafford, VA. For thirteen years, punctuated by overseas duty stations and deployments, my family has returned, time and again, to Stafford, traveling Highway 630, as she twists and winds, descends and rises, across Stafford County, west of Interstate 95.

At Thanksgiving I noticed that land was being cleared on either side of Highway 630. After all these years, this treacherous road is being widened, straightened and leveled. Government has acquired the land, reducing the expansive front yards of homes and encroaching upon business’ parking lots that line the route. I’m quite sure that private land-owners were compelled to cooperate through the government’s right to exercise Eminent Domain for the public good.

Four hundred and fifty years before the birth of Christ, Malachi was a great prophet among God’s chosen people Israel, announcing God’s Eminent Domain in the midst of their reconstruction projects. Having recently returned from Babylonian captivity, the Jerusalem temple and priesthood was a shadow of its former glory. The people were losing hope that the Lord’s promised savior would appear. Malachi calls the people to repentance, using the image of a messenger, refiner, and fuller, that will purify and clean God’s chosen people in preparation for the Lord to suddenly come to his temple. In Chapter 4, verse 5, Malachi says, God will send an Elijah figure before the coming of the Lord.

Malachi announces God’s Eminent Domain.
In our gospel text, Luke, author of both his gospel and Acts of the Apostles, quotes from Isaiah 40:

_The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 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; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’_

God prepares the way of the Lord in the desert – what Handel refers to as a highway for our God. What has been a treacherous road for the nation Israel, twisting and winding, descending and rising across her history as God’s chosen people – NOW God uses the imagery of bulldozers in the desert, widening, straightening and leveling a highway so that God’s people may see salvation.

**Isaiah announces God’s Eminent Domain.**

Luke tells us that “the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness” (Luke 3:2). We remember that John’s father, Zechariah, while serving as a priest in Jerusalem, was chosen to enter the Holy of Holies, the inner chamber of the temple sanctuary. Separated by a veil from the outer chamber, the people waited for him to return from offering incense to the Lord. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and announced that his elderly wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son, who “will be great in the sight of the Lord,” an Elijah figure, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:15-17).

**Gabriel announces God’s Eminent Domain.**

Zechariah did not believe this and questioned Gabriel. Unable to speak until the circumcision and naming of his newborn son, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the words that were adapted for our Call To Worship (Luke 1:76-79). I envision Zechariah setting-aside his writing tablet and cradling his Son in his arms. Overcome with thankfulness, Zechariah sings a canticle of praise:

76 _And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. 78 By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, 79 to give light to those who sit in_
darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

**Zechariah announces God’s Eminent Domain.**

Luke’s list of secular and religious leaders places John’s ministry within its historical context. Luke makes it evident that God calls John as a prophet in 28 A.D., give or take, to go into “the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of REPENTANCE for the FORGIVENESS of sins” (Luke 3:3).

In Luke/Acts, the verb for “repentance” is used 14 times and the noun 11 times – almost half the instances throughout the entire New Testament. Repentance is an important aspect of Luke/Acts - a change of mind, a reorientation of what we think. So, what is it about our thoughts, which lead to behavior, that need reorientation? Perhaps it is the cancerous idea that we can go it alone - that we don’t need God to intervene. When we confess, “I can’t,” in regards to our brokenness, we acknowledge that God can.

Each time that the noun or verb form of “sin” is used in Luke/Acts, the noun or verb form of “forgiveness” is used or implied. Therefore, the church cannot speak of sin and repentance without also speaking of forgiveness. There cannot be confession without absolution! Therefore, when the church is primarily in the business of delineating sin, we lose our market-share in the forgiveness business. John “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of REPENTANCE for the FORGIVENESS of sins” (Luke 3:3).

**John announces God’s Eminent Domain.**

Perhaps you are here today, lost in the valley of despair. Perhaps the crooked places in your life have the best of you. Perhaps mountains of pride get in the way of acknowledging your brokenness. God has Eminent Domain in the crookedness of life. God has Eminent Domain over despair and pride. God calls us to repentance and offers forgiveness, widening, straightening and leveling a highway to wholeness and healing through his Son, Jesus Christ. God exercises Eminent Domain over his family, making us blood-kin through Christ’s work on the cross, sending his Spirit to refine us and purify us in his image. And God sets before us a table of bread and wine, so that we might bring our brokenness before the One who was broken for us, that we might taste forgiveness and announce God’s Eminent Domain to the world. Amen.