

Have y'all ever wondered why, if God is reaching out to people all the time, more people don't come to God on a regular basis? **(pause)** Why is it so hard for people to come to Christ? **(pause)** This morning's passage has given me an idea about that.

Paul and Barnabus are on their second missionary journey and they have come to the town of Salamais near Cyprus. A man named Bar-Jesus, who was believed to be a magician was trying to maintain his status before the Roman Proconsul Sergius Paulus. When the Proconsul invited Paul and Barnabus to come and speak to him about the Gospel, Bar-Jesus tried to argue with Paul and Barnabus. It is Paul's correction of this false teacher Bar-Jesus that really caught my attention. Paul's correction reminds me

"Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, **will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord**" (Acts 13: 9,10)?  
RSV *emphasis mine*

of a warning given by Isaiah in Isaiah 40:3. This verse precedes the introduction of John the Baptist in all four Gospels. John's call to repent is always colorful; however, I find John's words in Matthew and Luke to be the most heart stopping.

"A voice cries:  
In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that benefit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:7-9)

My sisters and brothers, I have been asked to give a homily this morning instead of a full sermon because it is Mt. Ebal Sunday. I don't have the time to deal with this subject gently so I am going to be blunt. It does not matter what our traditions are or what good has been done through this church. While that stuff is great and wonderful it will still be great and wonderful when read in the archives of the Western North Carolina Conference sitting right on a shelf next to records for Mt. Ebal. **(pause)** Please take a good hard look around this room. **(pause)** Something is getting in the way of people outside this room coming to worship with us in this place. Something is making it hard for people to come to worship with us here at Central. Something is making it hard for people to come to God through Jesus Christ among us.

Church, What must a person do, what is necessary to be saved? **(pause for answers)**

If this is what is necessary to be saved, then what are we doing to get in **God's** way? If the goal is to lead people to Jesus Christ by our invitation and our example then what are we doing wrong? **(pause)** As I look around this room, clearly we are doing something wrong. There is too much empty space. Now, I believe God is speaking to the people in this room. So I am asking you to spend this week praying for God's confirmation about what we are doing right and seeking God's direction for how to improve. Next Sunday I want you to put it in that new "Word from the Pew" panel in your bulletin, and when Ad council meets, we'll discuss it. Let's find what is making the straight paths of the Lord crooked here at Central. Let's work together to make those paths straight again.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.