

Preparing the High-Way

December 3, 2017

Well thank God for Advent. Today we take our first step into the season of Advent, a time of preparation for Christmas. I value this season of the year. It's a gift provided by the Christian church. This is a gift to me. It is a gift to faithful Christians around the world, and it is a gift to the larger context of our world as well.

Whatever else the month preceding Christmas brings, this season provides an alternative to the hamster cage of frenetic routines. Some of us know hamsters. We shop, we trim the tree, we plan parties, we prepare to finish the year financially in business and in education. The calendar has a hard set when January one comes along, including the IRS accounting and a credit card reckoning. The hustle and bustle is all part of navigating the holidays and, indeed, this is a unique season with magic all its own. If you haven't yet seen "*White Christmas*" or "*It's A Wonderful Life*," that's part of the magic.

The gift of Advent, however, is that the church is preparing for an enrichment or even an alternative to our holidays in what could be better called a holy day. That's perhaps where this all got started once upon a time. Our communities of faith are preparing the way for Christ. More accurately, we are preparing to bear witness to the intentions of God for the human race: God's hope for the earth, God's hope for the varieties of people on every continent, in every language, every ethnic group, every skin tone, every climate and so on, and so on – the whole world if you will.

And that is part of what is so attractive in the reading from the Gospel of John this morning. John is the announcer of big stuff and good news that God's initiative is bringing hope for you and me and for the people of his day. John's message is that God has something good on the way, the way of peace on earth and goodwill to all humankind.

When we tune into the deeper meaning of this 'holy' that we find inside of the holiday, the church has an Advent gift to proclaim to the world, and our preparation is crucial so that we might deliver this proclamation with all the resources at our disposal, all the opportunities that God sets before us and places within us.

So, then, the lights and the programs, the reading of scripture, the diligent reflection, the soul searching of our devotional life is all part of our preparation. This is a call to prayer. This is a call to action, to gift giving perhaps as a testimony to God's generous and loving ways, seeking justice, caring for each and all of our sisters and brothers in our neighborhoods and around the world, seeking justice and caring for each and everyone, caring, and respect, and hope, and love.

When we are troubled by the charges and the counter charges of sexual misconduct, or lying in high places, or skullduggery in elections, here is perhaps an antidote. On a good day, the 'holy' breaks through and finds expression in all of the ways of the holiday. On a good day, 'holy' sneaks up and finds us maybe unaware. It also provides an opportunity for us to be a part of this ongoing project about preparing the way, not just the high and mighty, but like the way Jesus would help the poor, and the sick, and the lame, and those who are forgotten. To attend to the 'holy' is to build a highway in our own way and in our own lives.

So, in our text this morning is the story of mountains, and desert wilderness, and the way, or the highway – particularly God’s way – if you will. It is not too surprising that the early church, trying to find a way to announce this revelation of God’s intention and purpose, would recall and identify with the words of the later prophet, Isaiah 40.

Prepare a way in the desert. Comfort my people. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain will be brought low and the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places smooth.

What a moving passage. In scripture, in music, and in metaphor for our life-giving world – hope and possibility.

Now full disclosure: I love the images of mountains in the scriptures. “Under the hills around do I lift up my longing eyes,” and it goes on. My earliest years were beautifully blessed in the midst of the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in north central Pennsylvania. And when it comes to making every mountain low and every valley lifted up, I have seen the demonstration – this demonstration – in Pennsylvania hills. While growing up there, I watched the tops of mountains being blasted into smithereens with dynamite and then bulldozed down into the valley, raising the valley and lowering the mountain. The outcome was a smooth new road which did not require the burdensome and slow driving through the little valleys and climbing laboriously through the hills. Gone were the white-knuckle navigation of hairpin turns and switchbacks. The results were smooth sailing; I should say, smooth driving.

What a metaphor for the hopes of Israel that they would be freed from exile and travel through the wilderness returning to their homeland to Jerusalem. The prophet announces God’s action, God’s comfort and guidance on the way. What a metaphor for the hopes of the poor, and the dispossessed, and the generations who were lost in the days of John the Baptist. What a metaphor for the hope that is promised as we celebrate the birth of Christ and its meaning. What a metaphor for us in the midst of political and military strife, opioid epidemic, racial profiling, grinding poverty, and despair at violence and suspicion of one another.

Will God liberate us from the exile of addictions that entrap us? Will God once again prepare a way for our generation to get free from the threat of violence, looming bigotry, and hatred in public places and at the family table? Will we be able to look back after this season to see how God’s way helped us through the wilderness and how we helped God in this construction of a highway?

The hope of Isaiah leapfrogs from the exile in Babylon through the desert of the River Jordan. And it’s a highway, but it’s only halfway built. The destination moves forward. There John launches this huge mission and announcement to build a road that will pave the way for the important visitor: the Savior of the world.

And so this is a season of announcement and preparation. But we’re not building a bridge of concrete and steel, not a highway of rocks and gravel and macadam. But with 2nd Isaiah we hear the voice: God’s hope and comfort, comfort my people, prepare a way through the wilderness that you may find your way home. The mountains which need to be removed are things like the ways we block our contact with God, sometimes with busyness, so it’s not bad to

slow down and to stop. The lies that we tell ourselves about, well, it won't matter just this one time. And the way through the spiritual desert of our lives is more about getting back in touch with the God whose spirit sustains us and keeps us on the way – overcoming fear with courage, overcoming despondency with hope.

Prepare the way of the Lord, indeed. The Word made flesh and dwelling among us, abiding still in the world, still bearing hope, still calling us to good news, still offering forgiveness, still calling us to be a part of building a world where peace is the norm and not the exception. And how does the church prepare us for this greatest of homecomings? By immersing us in a different kind of beauty, a quieter, more reflective time with somewhat muted yet rich in lovely colors, shadow and light, one more candle on the wreath each week, the haunting melody of “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel” running beneath our reflections and the stories of prophets like Mary, and Elizabeth, and Isaiah, and Zechariah, and John the Baptist. Like them, we prepare to speak passionately, eloquently, honestly about God's salvation breaking into the world, daring to believe, daring to lean our way into that new hope, delivering us from the wilderness and making us and the whole world a complete and whole place and a holy people along the way.

Oh, that we may give ourselves in all the holiday busyness to the holy ways of God's way and the ways of Christ. So may it be. We give ourselves to this ministry. Amen.

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