

## The Way of the Lord

Isaiah 40: 1-9, Mark 1: 1-8

The earliest of the NT Gospels was almost certainly the Gospel of Mark. It begins not with a birth announcement, but with a message from the past, from the book of the prophet Isaiah: "I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mark 1: 2-3). From there, the Gospel introduces John the Baptist and moves straight to the ministry of an adult Jesus--no angelic announcements, no birth stories.

Followers of Jesus found a context for his life in words from their own Jewish faith, re-reading the prophets and seeing Jesus as a fulfillment of them, even though that was not the original message of Isaiah 40. The author of Isaiah addressed the Jewish people in exile in Babylon and brought them good and also challenging news right where they found themselves: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God!" These were words of a prophet writing as Isaiah to a people in exile more than 500 years before Jesus. These were a people ripped from their homeland, forced to question their culture and religion, and feeling terrified about the future. The prophet spoke to them words of comfort, a lot like another Jewish writer gave comfort to people in living in fear, confusion, and exile in the now familiar words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want."

The God of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm offers comfort by meeting our needs for essentials: food, water, shelter, safety, relationship, companionship, meaning, and intimacy—and by enabling us to face death with confidence. Our faith in God is vindicated even in the presence of our enemies. We are safe and secure. There is the promise of abundance and protection throughout our lives and awareness of our home with God.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm conveys the promise of comfort through the presence of God who is powerful and personal. It is the power of a promise to help us let go of our *fear of fear*, and become our best selves even in the darkness of life. It is the promise that we can find a sense of peace even in the valley of the shadow of death. This is the kind of comfort promised to Israel by their God in the midst of their exile.

Today is the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent. The watchword for this Sunday is peace. Peace is the gift of self, of being your *self*. This is not what someone else thinks you should be, but who you are, how God sees you. Ironically, we find this gift of self, of peace, in community. We receive the gift of peace for ourselves as we choose to step into our fear and walk by faith.

The gift you and I have to share with our world is the peace we receive, the experience we have of God's Spirit within ourselves and in relationship with others. Peace is the willingness we have to walk with others through their valleys of shadowed darkness, and not for their sake, but for our own sake, not to fix what's wrong with them, but to see God's presence more clearly in them and, as a consequence, in ourselves. The hope we are able to share with others is the hope we embrace ourselves that "goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives and," in some mysterious and unknown way, "we will dwell in the house [in the home] of the Lord forever."

God said to Isaiah

Speak tenderly (with comfort) to Jerusalem [people of Israel]

Cry to her that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid"

that she is "free at last!"

After some two generations in captivity in Babylon, God says you will soon be free--free from suffering of exile, free from the consequences of your actions. God does not allow those consequences to go on forever, does not leave us in exile. God's grace is sufficient, overcomes all guilt, All loneliness, all despair.

How did the Jewish people in exile respond to this news that they were free? Ultimately, about 10% of them actually returned to start life again in Jerusalem. 90% said no to God's invitation and chose to stay in the relative security of Babylon. The New Testament tells us we are free. The Apostle Paul (Galatians 5: 1) says simply, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The call to freedom is an inspiring one: that we are free from feeling left out, free from need the approval of others, free to be the player in your life, free to be a full participant in your family, in the community of faith. God tells us, all through the Bible that life is partnership with God and God makes us free. We are free indeed. You are free indeed!

You are free from any need to blame others because life is not the way you think they should be. You are free to work to make things better, free from the power of fear, from getting stuck in fear, free to celebrate your own and growth and development and the promise of your life. You are free to celebrate the wonderful growth, life, and development of this congregation over the past decade, and commit yourselves to making it even better in the future. A poem about freedom:

The dream of freedom  
take wing and fly  
to boldly go  
but we don't go  
we cling to familiar  
land-bound prisons  
Freedom inspires with  
heroes who step  
boldly into  
a stark sun  
but we choose to retreat  
Into the shadows  
We mean to change  
the world, but  
push comes to shove  
and we hold back  
fail to break through  
and give in to inertia.

We are called to freedom. Freedom's call sounds boldly in our hearts and echoes in our souls. Freedom is a gift, a possibility, but only when we refuse to give in to our fear, refuse to return to, or remain in, its slavery. Isaiah cried out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." In this Advent season, God invites us first to receive the comfort and reassurance we need, next to choose freedom over fear, and finally, to build some infrastructure—a highway in the desert in preparation for the way of the Lord.

The earliest Christians called themselves Followers of the Way. We too are called to follow the way of Jesus, and also to prepare that way. What is the way for us, the highway we are to build today? What is it for you in your life? What is it for the congregation of Crossroads Church? There are lots of possible answers for us, I just returned from attending the International Leadership Assembly in Chicago, and also a celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gamaliel Foundation, It is the organization of which More2 is the Kansas City affiliate. This was an exciting and inspiring time of recommitment and realization that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. The keynote speakers included Rev. James Forbes who preached a powerful sermon reminding us that there is power in the problem, meaning the

power to deal with and grow through life's problems is actually present in the problem itself . The potential of that power can be realized if God's people are there and God's purpose is in it and people speak truth to power. The highway we are called to build today is a way of promise and hope that God's power is present in the very problems we face as a nation, as a church, and as followers of Jesus.

Another speaker was NAACP President Ben Jealous. His was a challenge to our churches to keep in the very front of our minds and hearts the values of justice, equity, and compassion. The highway we are called to build today is paved with justice, with racial and economic equity, and with a firm commitment to the inclusion of all people: gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender; poor, minority, female, old, young or immigrant.

There was another speaker, not so famous, who reminded us that perhaps the most important work we have to today is to change the conversation in America away from scarcity to abundance. This is the abundance that comes when the world's richest nation reassesses its values and taps into the resource of all its people. It comes when we as people of God remember our own call to abundance. The highway we are called to build today is one paved with the passion to lift people up rather than grind them down, with the vision to seek a fair sharing of the load rather than a continued division into have and have not.

The New Testament says it was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way," who was ushering in the life and ministry of Jesus. Today, we all carry the light of Jesus. We are all God's feet and hands, just like Jesus. We are all the presence of God in the world, like Jesus. We all are preparers of the way, givers of comfort, soldiers of freedom, and builders of highways in deserts.

The questions stand before us. How will you begin to live this invitation, this good news? How will you participate in giving and receiving holy comfort? How will you begin to choose freedom over fear, freedom to become what you choose to see? How can you build a highway in the wilderness, a way through that people can travel from despair to hope, from scarcity to abundance, and from imprisonment to the glorious freedom of God? How can you begin to live this invitation now, this Advent season?

Eternal God, bless our vision and our efforts

We offer them and ourselves to you, to your work, in love, in Jesus' name. Amen.