

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 40: 1-5
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1: 1-8
December 6, 2020
SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“Prepare the Road!”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Two men stood alongside a road holding large signs saying “The end is near!” and “Turn before it’s too late!” Another man drove by, saw their signs and yelled out his window “You guys are nuts!” and continued driving. A few moments later they heard the sound of screeching tires followed by a loud splash. The first man looked at the second and said, “Maybe this isn't the best way to let people know that the bridge is out.”

The ancient nation of Israel was not known for its roads. It was the Romans who brought roads. It was the Romans who hauled enormous stones, flattened and shaped, laid side by side, and constructed a road system throughout the entire empire that can still be seen today as far as Great Britain, although not, it must be said, into Scotland. The Scots were so untamable that the Emperor Hadrian built a wall to keep them out! But during the time of the prophets the roads in Israel, such as they were, were trails. They were trade routes and pathways. Whenever possible they went around mountains, because mountain passes were always treacherous. Not only were there wild animals and bandits, but storms could quickly make them impassible. I do a lot of hiking and I’m always prepared for the trail to be a mess after a storm. Invariably huge trees have fallen across the path and floods have washed out areas. I encountered an enormous fallen tree just this week that I had to walk around. Sometimes those responsible for park upkeep clear and repair the trails. More often hikers just have to make new trails around the obstacles.

Those traveling in ancient Israel had to clear their own paths, or create new routes around obstacles. It was always the path of least resistance that was taken. Leveling a road, lowering mountains and raising valleys, was pretty much impossible. Clearing boulders and trees, yes. Filling in valleys and bringing down mountains, no. But when Isaiah prophesied the return of the people of Israel from exile in the immediate sense, and the ultimate return of all God’s children in the ultimate sense, the road home is cleared completely. A voice of one calling said: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

John the Baptist was that voice in the wilderness. But how did he clear the way for the Lord? How did he go about raising valleys, lowering mountains, shifting boulders and cutting down trees? He called people to engage in some extremely uncomfortable self-examination and to put things right. Christians traditionally refer to this as repentance, but because that word has become associated with a caricature of fundamentalist pastors carrying large signs saying “Repent! The end is near!” I prefer to use different words. Let’s try, rigorous self-honesty followed by change.

Interestingly enough, this is exactly what the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous does—although it does so in carefully worked out increments. And the reason given to newcomers is clear. “The person I was drunk. The person **I was** will drink again.” The only way to stay sober is total spiritual transformation. I have a pastor friend who was so struck by the philosophy of the AA group that met in his building every day that he actually worked the steps himself, even though he was not an alcoholic. While he didn’t have to admit he was powerless over alcohol, step one, he could admit he was powerless over his own sinful nature. He could come to believe that a power greater than himself could restore him to sanity, step two, and he could make a decision to turn his will and his life over to the care of God, which is step three. Steps four and five cover the full acknowledgement of wrongs done and recognition of guilt—both true guilt and the letting go of false guilt . . . and confession to God in the presence of another trusted human being. Six and seven are about being entirely ready for God to remove our defects and asking God to remove our shortcomings. Only God can change us at this level. We actually can’t do this on our own. And steps eight and nine involve making a list of those we have harmed and making restitution whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. Continuing to take a personal inventory and promptly admitting when we are wrong is step ten. Eleven is a lifestyle of prayer and meditation seeking to understand and do God’s will and twelve involves carrying the message to others. When I stopped to think about it this week, this a program that John the Baptist himself would have recommended! This is preparing the way for the Lord in twelve concrete steps.

My Calvinist Presbyterian background teaches me to look to the grace and sovereignty of God in all things, minimizing the human role in salvation. The opposite end of the theological spectrum puts all of the emphasis on human decision and it is entirely up to us whether or not we accept God’s salvation. But really it is a mysterious combination of the two. John came to prepare the way for the Lord by calling people to an honest reckoning of their lives. He did this by preaching in the wilderness, and by baptizing people. John’s baptism was a new thing. Self-administered ceremonial washing was common. People cleansed themselves from ritual impurity as part of life. And there was such a thing as proselyte baptism for those converting to Judaism. But a Jew had no need of this! John was actually asking Jews to do something only converts did. It was a way of conveying that their sin had estranged them so far from God that they had become like Gentiles. The recommitment needed was so drastic nothing short of a conversion experience would do. John’s was a baptism of repentance, of a deep change of heart, mind and behavior. The

Greek word is *metanoia*. It is the type of drastic change demonstrated in the lives of those who practice the twelve steps. The result is spiritual awakening and new life.

We may or may not practice the twelve steps, but all of us can do the work of preparing the way for the Lord in our hearts. It requires of us rigorous self-honesty. In order to change something that is wrong we must first recognize that something is wrong! That is the hardest part for most people. People in AA only do it because it is a matter of life or death. The average person is at a spiritual disadvantage. The average person can rationalize, procrastinate and completely deny reality. But that way leads to death, not life.

So today let's keep it simple. Today let us ask ourselves one question. What is blocking my spiritual path right now? Is there a boulder—a burden so huge I don't know how to shift it? Is there a valley—a depression so deep I can't find my way around it. Are there rough and uneven places in my relationships? Are there mountains of ego or self-aggrandizement that need to be brought low? Has any obstacle sent me so far off course that I don't know how to find my way back to the right path? When we come and lay our mess and burdens before God with total rigorous honesty, then and only then can the Spirit work. God will not always change our eternal circumstances, but God can remove the blockages and heal the deep wounds. God can give us the courage we need to make changes. I can't fix what is wrong on my own, but I can acknowledge what is wrong so the Spirit of God can work in me.

John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, and the wilderness has always been important in the history of Israel. The people wandered in the wilderness for forty years. They rebelled in the wilderness and they came back to God in the wilderness. They learned about God's provision in the wilderness, and they became a people in the wilderness. Although few of us here have ever experienced true wilderness, we are living through a kind of wilderness time right now. The familiar landmarks of life are not there. Covid 19 has turned our entire world upside-down. We are trying desperately to stay safe and isolated long enough to get vaccinated. And our political conflicts have grown in intensity to explosive and dangerous levels. But while the wilderness presents dangers, it also brings opportunities. When the ordinary routines are stripped away, we can more clearly examine our lives and discern where we are spiritually. And in the end God promises that "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Amen.

Isaiah 40: 1-5

40 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling:

“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Mark 1: 1-8

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—

3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.**8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”