

Sunday, December 10, 2017
Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 40.1-11; Mark 1.1-8

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A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Is 40.3-5)

We hear these words, or variations thereof, twice in today’s readings for the Second Sunday of Advent. First in their original context as written by the Prophet Isaiah and then again in summary form in Mark’s Gospel. Having them repeated throughout our lectionary readings would indicate that these words are to be paid attention to. That there is a message we are meant to hear. For indeed these words are at the very heart of Advent. They are what the entire season of Advent is about.

In the first context, the Prophet speaks these words approximately 2,500 years ago to the people of Judah who have been in Exile in Babylon for some 60 to 70 years. Isaiah, conveying the words of God, prefaces this message with words of consolation – “Comfort, O comfort my people” (Is 40.1). He goes on to give voice to God’s promise to the people that their time in Exile is coming to an end. That soon, they would be allowed to return to their home in Judah. The imagery presented is of a highway in the wilderness that will be the means by which the people will return from captivity to freedom. A road that is straight. A road that is level, with valleys lifted up, with mountains and hills made low. A road that will allow for easy travel from Babylon back to Judah. Maybe not literally, but metaphorically. That the return trip will be an easy one. Certainly easy compared with the path that they have travelled over the last few generations since the beginning of the Exile.

The prophecy evokes images of royal highways in the ancient Near East and the Roman Empire, which were constructed by conquering monarchs to facilitate the movement of troops and for celebratory processions. Highways that were a visible sign of the superiority of the conquering monarchs. Highways that celebrated military victory. Only now, this new highway that would be built in the wilderness between Babylon and Judah, even though only metaphorical, would be provided by the ultimate ruler. By God himself.

The highway that God will provide and the return of the people to their own land will be a sign of God’s constancy and faithfulness. The people had previously defied God, resulting (from their perspective) in Exile. Despite their unfaithfulness to God, he has remained faithful to them. And he demonstrates his faithfulness in this prophecy. In this promise God assures the people, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term; that her penalty is paid” (Is 40.2). They have done their penance. They have paid their debt. The sins of the people have been forgiven. And in return, they will be allowed to return home. Allowed to get on with their lives. Allowed yet one more chance to live into their covenant with their God.

In the path home that will be provided for them, “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (Is 40.5a) – the glory of a triumphant ruler. And despite the fact that the people, like grass and flowers live only for a season, “the word of our God will stand forever” (Is 40.8b). God promises that in his faithfulness to his people, he will come to them and be with them. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom” (Is 40.11). God will care for the needs of his people.

This is a promise of forgiveness. A promise that God will come to be among his people. A promise that he will feed and care for the people. A promise of the beginning of a new life for God’s chosen.

Mark’s Gospel opens with a paraphrase of these same words from Isaiah. This time in reference to – used to describe – John the Baptist. The one who prepares the way of the Lord, for the coming of God. Only this time, it is God incarnate. God in the flesh who is coming into the midst of the people. Unlike the other Synoptic Gospels – Matthew and Luke – Mark’s Gospel does not concern itself with the actual birth of God-in-the-flesh. With the birth of Jesus. Rather, he is more concerned with the adult Jesus. With the Son of God as he begins his public ministry. As he truly begins the work he came to do. To teach and to heal. To die and to be resurrected. To be the means of forgiveness and new life for God’s people.

John the Baptist was a prophet in the style of the Old Testament. Coming out of the wilderness, as did the prophets of old. Wearing clothes of camel’s hair, reminiscent of the Prophet Elijah who was considered to be one of the greatest of the prophets. The one whom the Jews believed would return prior to the coming of the Messiah. John preaches a message of repentance and amendment of life. He performs a sacrament of baptism for the forgiveness of sins as an outward sign – a sacramental sign – of a new way of life. A new way of life that is itself a means of preparing for the coming of God into our midst.

John is very clear as to his purpose. He is clear that he is not the Messiah. “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mk 1.7-8). John is merely preparing those who come to him to receive an even greater gift. To receive the One who is to come. And to receive the gift of the God’s presence among us and with us in the form of the Holy Spirit.

As with Isaiah, John is conveying a promise. A promise of forgiveness. A promise that God will come to be among his people. A promise that he will feed and care for the people. A promise of the beginning of a new life for God’s chosen.

The words of Isaiah – of “A voice [that] cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” – have a special meaning for me. They are a reminder of where I have come from and where I am now. Of what I am called to do as a Christian and as a priest. The image of building a highway in the desert reminds me of my former profession. Being a transportation planner that planned roads and

highways in Southern California. In an area that, despite our cities and urban sprawl, is nonetheless, a desert.

When I had finally discerned a call to Holy Orders and taken the necessary steps to begin that process – when the Diocese had cleared me for my own path through the wilderness, the path to seminary – I went to my boss and informed him of my decision and that I would be leaving the firm. I will never forget what Lloyd said to me. “You are merely trading one form of transportation planning for another.” A simple statement with profound implications. As a transportation planner, I had helped plan for vehicles to get where they wanted or needed to go. As a priest, I would be helping souls get where they wanted or needed to go. To deeper relationship with God. I would be helping souls get from this earthly realm to the heavenly realm.

In more Advent-y terms, I would be helping to prepare the way of the Lord. To prepare those in my care to receive God into their lives. To prepare for the coming of the Lord into their midst through the sacraments, such as baptism; through confession and reconciliation; in the Eucharist. To prepare those in my care to find God in their own lives through teaching and preaching. To prepare those in my care to discern their own ministries whereby they, too, would help others prepare the way of the Lord in their own lives.

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” These words are a reminder for all of us. Not just those in Holy Orders, but for all who follow Christ. These words are a statement of our true calling. In the wilderness of our secular society that is often seemingly devoid of God’s presence, we are called to prepare the way for the coming of our Lord. To be those who partake of the baptism of repentance. Repenting of those ways that hinder us in our journey along the highway in the wilderness. Embracing the forgiveness God offers us. The forgiveness made possible by the One who is coming into the world. The One whose birth we prepare for. To share that message of forgiveness, to share the message of God’s love. To find ways to build roads and highways through the wilderness in which we find ourselves. Ways that will allow ourselves and others to come closer to our God. To prepare a way that leads out of the captivity to the ways of this world into the freedom that God offers us in our true home – in our relationship with him.

The voice crying out, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” is not just a statement of what God is going to do. It’s not just a statement of what John the Baptist did. It is a command that we are to hear and obey. Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ into our midst. The coming of the one who builds the royal highway to permanently connect us with our God. Advent is about us building our own royal highway in anticipation and preparation for the One whose coming we await.