

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2014

Building a Highway for the King

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Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

I was trained as an engineer and have been involved in many engineering projects over the years --- everything from a few thousand dollars for small experimental chemical and metallurgical facilities to so-called mega-projects, complex energy facilities costing well over a billion dollars.

My first engineering job was when I was still in college. I was working one summer for a highway design and construction company. I had to take information provided by surveyors who had studied the location of proposed roads and then had to figure out what needed to be excavated and what needed to be filled in --- How much dirt and rock did we have to cut or blast away and what did we have to do to fill in gullies, ravines and other low spots.

You may have seen the work which went into building US 321 up the mountain to Blowing Rock. That was a massive job which took years to complete up the mountain but it still is not complete around Blowing Rock. A phenomenal amount of rock and earth had to be blasted away and many ravines and gullies had to be filled in. What you probably don't realize is that to keep costs as low as possible, roads like this have to be designed so that material which is dug or blasted away is balanced with the material needed to fill in the low spots. When building roads you don't want anything left over to get rid of, nor do you want to run short of fill material and have to truck more in from other places --- that costs a lot of money.

Our scripture from Isaiah says "Every valley shall be raised up and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." (NIV) That is exactly what needs to happen when you build a modern highway and that is what Isaiah is describing, all be it metaphorically.

The Isaiah scripture and our scripture from Mark both are alluding to building a highway for a king.

In Biblical times, when a king was planning a visit somewhere, he sent out workers in advance to prepare the road to wherever he was going --- to get rid of hazards, to shovel and scrape, to fill in holes, and so forth. He wanted a smooth and safe road to travel.

Isaiah is talking about preparing things for the arrival of the Messiah. He is telling us to get ready --- to get our houses in order. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, a noted Episcopal priest, Isaiah is telling "...us to pause, to take stock, to lie on some hillside a little distant from our destination and watch the stars ... (He) tells us to empty our hearts so that there is room in them for the birth of something new and altogether unforeseen"

She goes on to say that, "...while paving a highway --- a sort of landing strip for the Lord --- may not be our idea of holy preparation, for a desert nomad (like the people Isaiah is prophesying to) it must have seemed like a piece of heaven for all the valleys to be lifted up and the mountains made low. No more hard climbs or knee-wrenching descents, no bandits down in the valley or wolves around the bend."

Those sorts of things were why kings sent out advance parties to check the road, to get rid of obstacles, and to make sure that the road will be safe for the king to travel.

We do that today. When the President of the United States goes anywhere, an army of police and secret service agents go before him to assure that things will be safe and secure for him. Every road that the President will travel on is carefully checked for hazards and elaborate protection systems are put into place along the entire route. Do you remember what Charlotte was like two summers ago when the Democratic National Convention was held there? Not only was the President there but also hundreds of high ranking officials from all over the country. These precautions are certainly understandable.

Biblical kings expected similar precautions and Isaiah is metaphorically telling the Israelites to prepare the road for the coming of the King of Kings, to get ready for his coming and to prepare accordingly --- to get rid of the pot holes, gullies and high hills --- to atone for their sins. When and if they do that they can say, "... the glory of the Lord will be revealed." (NIV)

But, according to Isaiah, “All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, because breath of the Lord blows upon them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” (NIV)

Those words don't necessarily seem very comforting to us personally, do they? They seem to say that everything we love and everything we know is doomed. Only the word of God is reliable and lasting, a God that we know very little about.

We need to read further. This is only the Old Testament. We need to look for better news, more information, in the New Testament, and we find it in our gospel message from Mark.

Notice the similarity in the early part of the gospel reading to the words of Isaiah, “I will send messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way” --- “a voice calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” (NIV) That messenger is John the Baptizer.

John the Baptizer proclaimed baptism for the repentance of sins but tells the crowd that Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, is coming and will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. We are on the highway to Bethlehem and are nearly halfway through Advent and to the coming of Christmas, the coming of God incarnate in human form, Jesus the Messiah. Again quoting Barbara Brown Taylor, “With the wisdom of centuries, our tradition tells us that the journey itself is what we need as much as finally reaching that cattle feeding trough in a shed at Bethlehem, the trough holding the infant Christ child. “

But Mark doesn't tell us about that manger in Bethlehem. There is no angel talking to Mary, no shepherds watching over their flocks, no wise men, no inn keeper, no animals standing around, no long trip for Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem --- none of the stories which we associate with Christmas and with the birth of Christ.

To the writer of Mark, those stories were not important, or perhaps he didn't even know about the story of Jesus' birth. What was important was that the first prophet Israel had seen in hundreds of years, John the Baptizer, was preaching and baptizing in the wilderness and he was telling people that someone was coming who was so

powerful that he would baptize them, not with water but with the Holy Spirit --- the long awaited Messiah, Christ the Lord, would be arriving soon.

The story of John the Baptizer began when Mary learned that she was pregnant with Jesus and went to tell the wonderful news to her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth was then about six-months pregnant and her baby jumped with joy in her womb. That baby was to become John the Baptizer and even while still unborn he knew what his destiny was to be.

Today's scripture readings come from the suggested Lectionary readings for the Second Sunday of Advent. There is also a daily Lectionary of scripture for year around study of the Bible. The daily gospel reading for today is Luke 1:57-68, the story of the birth of John. To refresh your minds about that story, recall that John's father, Zechariah, was mute. Listen to the telling of the story in the Book of Luke.

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, ⁶⁰ but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

⁶¹ They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

⁶² Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

⁶⁷ His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,

because he has come to his people and redeemed them. (NIV)

The hand of the Lord was indeed with that child and he grew up to become the first of the Lord's prophets in Israel in hundreds of years, the prophet who would foretell of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, Christ, the Messiah.

John was a strange character who dressed like Elijah had dressed 800 years earlier. He wore a camel's hair coat and belt and he lived on locusts and honey. He was shaggy and unkempt, most likely never having cut his hair or trimmed his beard.

This strange man was proclaiming something incredible, the coming of a savior, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God.

Eugene Peterson's Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, puts it this way:

As he preached he said, "The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism --- a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit --- will change you from the inside out."

Jesus, the leading actor in this stage play did come. John baptized him, the heavens opened, and the voice of God came down like a dove proclaiming, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Prepare the way of the Lord. Make room in your hearts for something wonderful. We will celebrate Christ's coming in eighteen days. He came as a tiny child and has changed our lives forever. We have not prepared the road for Him. He has prepared the road for us. In Christ we have been forgiven of our sins and are assured of salvation.

Thanks be to God. **Amen!**