

Prepping the Paths
December 10, 2017
Isaiah 40: 1-11, Mark 1:1-8
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

*People, get ready
There's a train a-coming
You don't need no ticket
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the diesels humming
Don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord.*

The passages today brought so many songs to mind – not Christmas songs, because the readings are definitely Advent related: the Advent theme of waiting and anticipation for something groundbreaking and earth shattering to happen.

The book of Mark is straightforward, likely the first gospel from which Matthew and Luke sourced much of their material. It's snarky and to the point – no flowery ruminations or unnecessary words. This is the book we begin today from the very beginning. The beginning of the good news of JC, the Son of God, the first line of Mark begins. (Implied is that this is just the beginning; the good news continues today).

Mark has no cute baby in the manger story, no virgin or angels or wise men, no shepherds or cattle lowing. Instead, after the Old Testament quote from the prophet Isaiah, we are immediately introduced to John the Baptist, not a tender infant but an grizzly adult wearing clothes about 600 years out of date and munching on locusts and honey.

I remember the children's song about John the Baptist eating bugs for lunch, referencing the locusts and honey. But I learned when I visited Israel in May of this year that the locusts John ate were likely pods of the carob tree, which are plentiful in the Judean wilderness, and resemble locusts. In any case, bugs or pods, John was a renegade spirit. And a humble one. He doesn't claim to be the Messiah when asked, but the one who is unworthy to untie the sandals of the one coming. He is the one preparing the way, and urging others to take heed and prepare with him.

Last Sunday night I was rather tired. My kids were away at college and my husband was away out of town on business. We had decided we would wait to decorate the house for Christmas until the following weekend. But something stirred in me. It was a dark night, and I didn't want to wait a whole week and lose that week of the decorations. So I decided I would just get out the small ceramic tree and place it on

the entry table. Well, once I had made my way to the Christmas decoration boxes in the storage area, there was no stopping me.

I was running up and down the stairs with lights, wreaths, stockings, china crèche scenes, wooden crèche scenes, the ceramic Madonna and child statue, little miniature trees and garland and snowmen and angels and nutcrackers and painted reindeer that my grandma made me and finally with all of that, I decided I might as well put up the Christmas tree, too.

Part of my hesitation for starting the decorating process is that I have to remove many things first. I have to clear out all of the year-round knick-knacks on the shelves and countertops to make room for the Christmas ones. In other words, I need to clear the way, to make room for Christ to enter. I can't just slap up the crèche scene amidst the potted plants and glass bowls. The baby Jesus would be crowded out and lost among all the other things. I want Christ and the manger scene to stand out. There is definitely a clearing that needs to take place in my house first.

I think this is like what we do in Advent in our inner lives as well. We are meant to look at what is in our lives that is not useful, what attitudes and behaviors we have that crowd out Christ, that obscure the peace that we claim to seek. Just like we prepare our homes for the Christmas decorations to enter, we prepare our hearts and minds for Christ to enter. Some things have to go. We enter the wilderness, the array of Christmas boxes in storage, or the clutter of a year of knick-knacks, or the dark places in our lives we have not yet examined, and try to make sense of what those things are.

It's not easy. And in a year for many of personal and worldly devastation, commentator Kathleen O'Connor writes, "Disasters make people numb, afraid and hopeless, and undermine faith in God and an orderly and secure world." Such was the case, too, in both our Bible readings today. In the beginning of 6th c BCE, leading up to the Isaiah 40 passage quoted in both readings, Babylon had invaded Judah and destroyed much of Jerusalem and deported its leading citizens to Babylon.

The people in the Isaiah passage have interpreted the disaster of the Babylonian invasion as God's judgment against the sinfulness of the people. They experience what they interpret as God's absence and God's silence. They live in fear and guilt, and a long way from home, as they knew it.

Today's reading from Isaiah comes out of this context, in what is known as Second or Deutero-Isaiah, believed by scholars to be written during the Babylonian exile, where our reading begins, puts aside blame and focuses on restoration, comfort, joy and hope.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from

the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all the people shall see it together.

The passage presents the hope of solid ground for a fearful people – not in the destroyed temple, collapsed monarchy or broken covenant, but in God's word of hope. Though everything else fails, the passage says, God's word endures forever, and that God will lead them home.

Our New Testament reading quotes this Isaiah passage. An analogy is made between what the Israelites faced in 6th c. BCE and what they face now in the gospel of Mark's time 500 years later, with divisions, uncertainty and turmoil amongst their people under Roman occupation. Just as Isaiah looks for God's intervention to restore Israel from Babylonian exile, in Mark, John the Baptist is proclaiming a time of preparation through repentance – for the people to examine themselves to see whether they are fit to stand before a righteous God. John, too, is looking for God's intervention to set things right, and the people's participation in that.

We are, too. Many of us in the world today are in the midst of disasters, looking for God's intervention to set things right as did Isaiah and John. We have new fires raging now in Southern California, mass shootings in holy places such as churches and mosques, political chaos, personal chaos, poverty, oppression and discrimination. And there is the ever-present lurking disaster of disease.

I ran into a friend recently who works as the senior staff scientist in the department of neurology at UCLA, and was formerly at the Buck Institute for Research in Aging here in Marin. Patty works to find the cure for Alzheimer's. God bless her soul, and praise be to God for her work. We talked a bit about some new publications, and Patty said that the single-most important thing that can be done to prevent Alzheimer's is to get up and explore new things. To stay active, involved and engaged, continually learning and thus creating new neural pathways in the brain.

Tom Hanks was asked whether he is the last good man left in Hollywood. It was an exaggeration meant to highlight the number of men in the entertainment industry (not to mention those in politics) who have been charged with inappropriate predatory behavior. Hanks replied that he is optimistic about the future and said, "It's never too late to change things. It's never too late to learn new behaviors."

So not just on an individual level, but on a societal level, we can be preparing the way for Christ to come, for God's kingdom to manifest, for the world to know peace. When we become aware of those behaviors and attitudes that are no longer appropriate, acknowledge our part and make an effort and a commitment to change, we become healthier and our society becomes healthier and we are preparing the way of the Lord.

Both the Old and New Testament readings take place in the wilderness. This is where we must go to prepare. Those uncharted, dark and overgrown places that have not been explored or tended to. This is where God meets us. Where we have lifted up the valleys and lowered the mountains and hills and smoothed out the rough parts so that there is level ground for the Lord to be revealed. We do our part and leave room for God's grace.

This is why we put in the work, the hard labor of leveling and preparation, because we will meet a God of everlasting truth, we will find what we have been seeking that can be found nowhere else. The prophet says, "People are like grass and flowers, which wither and fade." God comes with a mighty arm, a power of gentleness and steadfast love like that a shepherd shows his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms and carrying them and leading them in the right way.

There is not coercion or force. There is not arrogance or competition. There is simply comfort and peace and forgiveness and love. This is where we put our hope - in this tender and trustworthy shepherd God, who cares for us unconditionally. This Lord is the God whose word stands forever. We can trust in this promise.

Let us consider today, as we reflect on the beginning of the good news in Mark, what is the beginning of the good news in each of our lives? How might this good news help us to prepare for a coming world of peace?

Advent reminds us we must not give up. God is coming. Let us warm up our voices for the hymn by singing together: *Prepare Ye, the way of the Lord; Prepare Ye the way of the Lord.* Amen.