

“Preparing the Way”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
December 4, 2011/ Second Sunday of Advent

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; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:1-11)

It was some six hundred years before Christ. The people of Judah were in great distress and desolation. They had been overwhelmingly defeated in their wars with the Babylonians. In 597 BC, Jerusalem had been captured, and the king and his court taken into captivity. Ten years later, in 586 BC, Judah was again locked in battle with the Babylonians. This time, Jerusalem was destroyed, its walls pulled down, the temple burned, and additional Judeans deported.

It is in this context and to this desolate and despondent people that Isaiah cries out in our first lesson today: “*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."* (Isaiah 40:1-3)

I am sure that many of you are hearing a crystal tenor voice ringing in your heads. This is the first solo piece of Handel's Messiah, coming immediately after the orchestra's overture. I hope you will come back to hear these words on Handel's music this afternoon. They are not a desperate cry of a languishing people, but stunning words of hope and encouragement. Unlike last Sunday's lesson (Isaiah 64:1-9) in which the people lament, cry, and plead to God, today's text offers great hope and comfort. The strife will be over. The people will be addressed. God is coming on the highway they are preparing.

This, my friends, is a bold declaration. People were grieving and demoralized. They thought that God had abandoned them. If ever you have been there, completely under water -- you body tired, your heart broken, your mind troubled, your spirit parched, your life empty -- if you have ever been there, you may understand what their thoughts and feelings were, if not totally, to a certain degree. What went wrong?, you ask. Is God angry at me? You doubt God's

love. You doubt God's power. You burst with anger and frustration; you break down in guilt and self-pity. You question who God is and who you are.

Yet, in our lesson today, the prophet dares to challenge the theological rut of blame and despair. He reinterprets the past; he reframes the present. Instead of imploding or bursting out, instead of blaming and accusing, the prophet sings. "*Comfort, O comfort my people,*" the Lord commands, and thus sings the prophet, in lyric poetry.

Then, a voice from the heavenly court continues, "*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; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*" (Isaiah 40:3-5)

These are God's never failing words. Though everything else may fail, these words will not. Surely, God will come in strength, with arms stretched out in triumph. Surely, God will come in tender and caring presence, like a shepherd gathering the wounded and scattered flock. Surely, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

These, my friends, are the basis of our hope and certitude, from the time of creation and throughout history. These are the fertile and life-producing words given to us for our daily sustenance and nourishment in our wilderness journey. We are mistaken if we confuse these words with the sentiment of the season. We are mistaken if we treat these words like some special treat for a holiday feast - fleeting, fading, withering, and temporary. Isaiah cries out, and so does John the Baptist in our gospel lesson, and we sang it today: "*Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*" These definitely are not cheap words of grace meant to give us some seasonal cheer.

I do not think that we need a degree in engineering to know that building a highway in the desert is not an easy task. It is a hard work requiring well-planned steps and persistent endeavor. It is difficult work which can be done only by the disciplined and devoted labor of a community – a road crew. Building a highway for God is an unhuman, or superhuman, task unless we realize that we do not have to do it alone. No one can fill in the valleys and level off the hills alone, by himself or herself. We need a crew to do this work. We need a community.

In the community of faith, the burdens of our individual lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, are transformed into opportunities of mutual care and support. In the community of faith, we find the courage to face our nature – our greed, jealousy, anger, resentment, and self-pity. In the community of faith, we dare to show our wounds and give up our clinging fears. In the community of faith, we begin to hear the voice that speaks of love, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, peace, hope, and joy. In the community of faith, we begin to speak that enduring, fertile, and life-giving language ourselves.

Church is that place, my friends, where we prepare the way of our Lord. Each time we gather together, we let the enduring Word of God blast the hills of pride and the mountains of anger. Each time we gather together, we let the enduring Word of God shore up the valleys of our guilt and shame. Each time we gather together, we let the enduring Word of God smooth out the ruts. Each time we gather together, we let the enduring Word of God clear out the rocks. Yes, my friends, we are a road crew, gathered and graced by God, to build the highway for our coming Lord! Thanks be to God for the enduring Word! Thanks be to God for our church and its road crew! Thanks be to God!