

Saving Space¹

Isaiah 40:3-5, Luke 3:1-6

First Presbyterian Church

December 12, 2021

Isaiah 40:3-5

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."

As we know, Advent is a season of preparation... of getting ready. We clean our homes to welcome family and friends... we put up and decorate the tree... we buy and wrap presents... we cook and bake special recipes... which means this "season" is perhaps the busiest of the entire year... we are hyper busy getting ready. And then comes JOHN! At least for us church-folk, then comes John the Baptist – interrupting our schedules... inviting us to put down our to-do lists long enough to prepare in a different way. Put bluntly, John calls us to prepare NOT for Christmas, but for Jesus. And that requires a whole different kind of getting ready.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Sermon

It's one of the images in the Bible that literally comes alive when you visit Israel – this image from Isaiah of constructing a road through a desert. "Clear the road for the Lord," he says, "Prepare a highway across the desert for our God." Now, this might not be our idea of holy preparation for the coming of God... but let me tell you, for a desert nomad it would have seemed like heaven on earth for all the valleys to be lifted up and the mountain and hills made low. No more hard climbs or knee-jarring descents... no bandits hiding in the valleys or wolves around the bend. No, according to Isaiah, the way of the Lord is flat and straight and totally safe.

¹ This sermon adapts a sermon "Saving Space" by Barbara Brown Taylor, published in *Mixed Blessings*, p.40-46

It's this same message that John the Baptist proclaimed 600 years later... the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." You see, BOTH Isaiah and John are waiting for something to happen... BOTH trust that something will happen... and BOTH know that some prep work needs to be done to get ready – valleys need to be lifted up... mountains and hills made low... rough places and uneven ground smoothed out... it's the image of building a runway/a landing strip for God on this earth. And OUR question this morning is how do we take this vivid, but ancient image and apply it to us... here... now?

Well, certainly it's true that WE – like Isaiah and John – are waiting for something... if not for the coming of the Lord, then for something else: for true love... for the return of our health... for our children to launch... for the grief to wane... for a job that challenges us... for peace in our families, in our nation, in our world. We're all waiting for something... and that's what makes Isaiah and John our brothers – because they, like us, yearn for something better. For Isaiah it was the revealed glory of God, whatever that meant for him. For John it was the one who would come after him, one who was mightier than he. Neither one knew any of the details – not who, what, when, or where? All they knew for sure was that the old way of life was passing away and new life was on its way... and that in the meantime, there was prep work to do... some serious getting-ready work... and at the very least, that meant clearing away anything that might get in the way.

Well, since this is Advent, and we are waiting for Christmas... and since Christmas is story of the birth of a very particular baby... let's think about babies for a bit and about all that goes into preparing a place for the new life that is coming to the family. Though some homes have plenty of rooms for a nursery, most don't. Which means that to make room for the new life that is on the way, the other kids may have to move in together and share a room... or the much-loved sewing room or home office or study may have to go. Well, whether it's a new baby we're expecting, or the Baby Jesus, or a grown-up Lord coming in great power and glory, we are called to do whatever it takes to make room... as painful as that may be... to make space for him... because it's either that or prepare ourselves to miss out because there was no room in us. I have been using Walter Brueggemann's Advent devotional book this year. And on Day One (as you would expect) he wrote: "This is the time for getting ready – not mainly about busy activity, entertaining, and fatigue. Getting ready is asking, thinking, pondering, and redeciding."² I like that word: "re-deciding." Isn't that what we do each Advent? We redecide what and who we will worship? Redecide who and what will have our ultimate allegiance? Redecide what in our lives is "of God" ... and what are the idols of our own making?

While training our new class of session members last month, I was reminded once again that one of the "essential tenets" (or foundational beliefs) of our Reformed theological tradition is the recognition that we human beings are very prone to idolatry. John Calvin put it bluntly – he said that "[Human] nature... is a perpetual factory of idols."

² Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent*, Compiled by Richard Floyd (WJKP, 2017), p. 4

Meaning that we are constantly looking to everything that is NOT God to fill us, to satisfy us, even to save us. And what is surprising is how incredibly sneaky and deceptive some of our idols are. I mean, anyone can turn and walk away from a golden calf if we believed our souls depended on it – it's an obvious idol. But what about idols that aren't so obvious? Say, the idol of independence... the belief that everything will be good if we can just take care of ourselves and not have to ask anyone else to look out for us? Or the idol of a good reputation or being well-liked? Or the idol of accomplishment and success in our career? The idol of fitness and body image? Or perhaps the most deceptive of all, the idol of religion – the belief that if we go to church and pay our pledge, we are good with God. "Now wait just a minute, Whit. Wait just a minute. All these things are good and noble... how can you say they are idols!" and I say, "Of course, they are good and noble. That's how they become idols! They're good and noble things (and people and experiences) that gladden our hearts and nourish our souls... SO MUCH SO that we come to love them and depend on them and prioritize them above everything else - as if they are the source of life itself... when God is the source of life... as if they are what saves us... when it is God who saves us. And eventually, we are so full up with these that there is no room in the inn... when God is looking for a nursery, the room is crammed full of other stuff.

So, here we are – two weeks before Christmas – and our brothers Isaiah and John are inviting us to join them in doing some prep work... some serious getting-ready. NOT to forsake all the things we love and want for our lives, but to forsake them *as idols*. And that means recognizing them... naming them... learning to hold them lightly, without grasping... and being willing to give them up when it becomes clear that they are taking up too much room.

So, what will it be for you? God is always wanting to bring you new life... as Heather said last week, God is always wanting to be born in you. So, what needs to go first? What is taking up too much room? Because during Advent, we are invited to ask... think... ponder... and redecide... to prepare the way for the coming of God himself to those who have saved him room.