

# Preparing the way

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent: 6 December 2008

Isaiah 40 1-11

The Rev. Richard Nelson

*A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)*

These words are echoed at the beginning of Mark's Gospel in the figure of John the Baptist. *Prepare the way of the Lord*: we hear such words many times before Christmas. If you are of my generation you remember the song from the musical "Godspell". At St. Thomas every Sunday in Advent we sing *Prepare the way, O Zion*. Today the Choir's anthem features the refrain: *Prepare ye the way of the Lord*.

Like many 'churchy' words – especially in the consumerist hysteria before Christmas – we can simply accept such words as part of the decorations for Christmas; we place it beside Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch; December 28<sup>th</sup> or so it's put away again.

An obvious question when hearing, *Prepare the way of the Lord* is: Why does God tell people that *they* are to make God's highway straight? If God is omnipotent you'd think God could make his own travel arrangements.

Of course, the invitation to prepare God's way is not to be taken in a wooden manner. It is what I would call a literal metaphor, by which I mean the invitation to prepare the way of the Lord is not about the preparations one makes for a visit from Uncle Gus and Aunt Helen, but it is about real preparations; and not for a visit but for a permanent habitation. The preparations for God's arrival are not about cleaning rooms, washing sheets and getting more groceries, but the preparations are no less real, no less about our thoughts and actions, no less important.

The prophetic call to prepare the Lord's way is a poetic expression of the desire for the fulfillment of God's arrival to be swift and unimpeded. There is a sense of urgency and at-the-finger-tips expectancy. Children, and sometimes adults, have such urgency and expectation about Christmas morning. One's desire for the fulfillment of God's arrival in our lives, in the world around us, is to look like that says the prophet.

I want to return to my first question: why would prophets, inspired by the Holy Spirit, prophecy that the people are to make the highway straight; couldn't God – as it were – make His own highway?

The answer is both simple and awesome. The action of God always includes a call for God's people to become what God is doing. God does not come as some alien force from outside but comes in the midst of, and through, those whom God calls.

This is why "fairy-tale" prayers go unanswered. By "fairy-tale" prayers I mean those we address to God that are about God making *our* way straight and pleasant; the fairy-godmother type of thing; God swooshing down with a magic wand; God take away this, change that, give so-and-so a personality transplant, let me win the lottery. Fairy-tale prayers ask God to alter circumstances and people around us while not changing the one who is doing the asking: things, people, events must change around me, but not me!

Implicit in every prayer is the desire and offering of oneself to be, somehow, the way through which God will work. This is so even with our 'big' prayers. We pray for peace in the world; yet how can we expect God to touch the minds and hearts of enemies on the other side of the planet if you and I are not willing to be instruments for peace in our homes, our relationships, our workplaces, our communities. To want God to answer prayer always means we offer to be one through whom God will work here and now.

*We prepare the way of the Lord* by offering selves, our lives as a way for God to be present and active in the world. Here are three ways in which we may actively do this.

First, repentance: this was the theme of John the Baptist's ministry and are the first words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel: Repent, for the kingdom of God is near. Repentance is more than sorrow for past wrongs; repentance begins with the admission of not doing what God desires of us in our life, but then quickly moves on to the real heart of repentance which is an active turning to the way of God. The word used in the New Testament that is translated 'repentance' means literally a 'turning around'. We begin with admission of wrong, but then move quickly onto the desire made active in our lives of walking a new path, with God's help. Repentance is not about guilt, shame or wallowing in regret. Repentance is about desiring God to change our lives; to become ways in which God's reconciliation and holiness will be manifest in this world. The most basic attitude and prayer of repentance is: O God, in your mercy, change me so that I might reflect you.

Second, we prepare the way of the Lord by taking it one step at a time. Here is wisdom the 12 step tradition has popularized: one day at a time, one step at a time, often one moment at a time. This both centers us in our lives as they are actually unfolding and gives us patience with ourselves, with others and with God. Taking one step at a time is crucial become your life right now is all you have. The past can be regretted but not changed; the future is yet to be and therefore is not actually real. Preparing the way of the Lord is something we do today, and it can be done today because everything about your life today matters. Every encounter, every action, every thought can be a preparing of God's way today; or they can be something we squander.

Third, preparing the way of the Lord is not just about you, not just about me. In the Bible the invitation to prepare the way of the Lord is always given to the community of faith. If we had a southern translation of Isaiah and John the Baptist, it would read: *All y'all! Prepare the way of the Lord.* The invitation is to join with, to be in the community that prepares God's way. There are times on the journey when some will lag behind, and we must slow our pace to stay together. If we lag behind, that may be an indication to quicken our pace. There are times when someone will stagger under a heavy load, and we must lighten their burden by sharing it. There will be times when we will feel worn out, and must humble ourselves to accept others' help. Sometimes we will carry those who think they can go no farther, and sometimes it is us who are being carried. Just as preparing God's way is not the work of a moment, neither is it the work of the individual. It is *our* vocation. And may we respond to God's call.

*A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* God help us prepare our lives for you, our faith community for you; and help us to do what is right, that the world, too, may be prepared for your fulfillment; that your Holy Name may be known, worshipped and obeyed. Amen.