

Advent 2: Prepare the Way a sermon by Rev. Keenan Kelsey December 4, 2011  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

TEXTS: Isaiah 40:1-8 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 for ever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O 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.

Mark 1:1-8 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight"', John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

"Wait" we said that last week. "Wait" we heard in our call to worship. And now we hear prepare. Prepare for what? How do you prepare for that which you do not know, can barely imagine? We hope and pray for justice and righteousness and shalom and community and joy? But how to PREPARE?

I fear it is getting harder to even imagine a world which, at the very least, is based on honesty, integrity, compassion, loving kindness. Certainly the people of the exile could not imagine such a world –

They were living in relative ease in Babylon, albeit a second-class secular sort of existence. They were secretly longing for home but the older generation doubted that it could ever happen and the younger generation could not even remember the home

Jerusalem. It is similar, perhaps, to many of us, living in relative ease but still yearning for a world we aren't sure ever existed or could exist again.

The Isaiah passage begins as a conversation between God and the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has been despairing that the Hebrew people will return to Jerusalem, let alone be any better followers of God in the future. But God says "Comfort, comfort my people, Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term." So Isaiah rallies, and calls to the people "Prepare the way!" And somehow, just in the calling, the people receive a new vision for the future.

Ahead, Isaiah says, lies yet another desert trek, but this time there will be no wandering as did the Israelites of the Exodus long ago. Instead, the high road leads straight home to Jerusalem and travelling will be easy along level ground because this is the highway of Yahweh.

"Prepare the way, make straight paths for God's Son." John the Baptist cries out. No Christmas stories for the Gospel writer Mark's John. No nativity or star or wise sages. The beginning, says Mark, is the prophesy and the good works. Mark offers no birth narrative, nor does he describe the Baptist's reaming folks out over their transgressions, or any high drama around immersion in the Jordan. Apparently ritual cleansing, in running water, the Jewish act of Mikvah, did not surprise the crowds... but John took the commonplace and enriched it with new meaning: change your hearts and lives and God will give you a fresh start. Not bad for the season of Advent wherein we prepare ourselves for the Coming One.

John is stirring up excitement. Is God about to do something new? That John resembled Elijah, who was the one to come before Messiah, only heightened the effect.

For Mark, John the Baptizer represented all that had gone before throughout Israel's faith-history: the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into the world was the fulfillment of those prophecies. Now that God's love and purpose for Israel were near, John called everyone to prepare by repenting through the act of baptism. Prepare by turning back to God through baptism – an action which represented new life but also new commitment.

God says, "Cry out!" But still Isaiah wonders, was this message of comfort and deliverance trustworthy? Could the Israelites themselves to be trusted? After all, their loyalty had been as ephemeral as the grass and flowers of the field which today blossom forth and tomorrow vanish.

Yet Yahweh is clear: Yahweh's word, would stand forever; therefore it can be trusted eternally.

"Prepare ye the way," cries the Advent God. "Trust and follow" cries the Advent God. Dream and believe, cries the Advent God. Work for the change. Be ready to follow the Messiah.

Do you know what is one of the strongest words of hope in the English language? If. Think about it for a moment. Create a sentence which begins with the word "if."  
If I do it this way instead of that way, it will save me time.  
If those two people work together to do the job, I know it will be done well.  
If she can get here on time, we'll be able to get in free.  
Do you hear the hope, the power, the possibility of what is envisioned?

In a book called "Grammars of Creation" the author contends that whenever human speech dares the future tense of the verb "to be", the power of death is negated. And when we begin a sentence with the word "if", we refuse the brute inevitability, the despotism of the fact.

I am fond of using the phrase, "it is what it is." For me it means accept the things you cannot change. Deal with it. But for Isaiah, and for John the Baptist, and for the many who know themselves as God's people first and foremost, this phrase is only valid if you recognize the first line of the familiar Serenity Prayer, "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." The Advent message is that you cannot say the first line without the second line is: Courage to change the things I can.

Without the second line, the "If I do this, then this might happen" line, there is no room for hope. And if there is anything this world needs, it's hope. See, I used the word "if" in there. Our reading from Isaiah is a passage of hope.

Isaiah countered despair of physical and cultural captivity in Babylon by looking forward. There is no mention of the exile here, no soft words of looking back and dwelling on past hurts. There is only hope.

Isaiah said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass" And God said, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. 9 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, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

Do you hear the words of hope? Do you hear the future in this passage?  
Do you hear the power? Do you hear the possibility? Do you catch the hope?

This is not quiet, gentle Jesus meek and mild stuff. Journey and repentance are tough stuff. This preparation is a readying of the heart and a commitment to sacrifice and to hope. But it is sweetened by the declaration of God almighty that things will be different. There will be a new day; a day in which God will rule; God will feed his flock like a shepherd. The proud and the powerful will be scattered and the day of God's justice will prevail. These are the words of God with us. Thomas Merton wrote: "the call is not escape from the world into idealism, but the transformation of consciousness by a detached and compassionate acceptance of the empirical world in its interrelatedness. Merton says, with Isaiah and with John, be part of this interrelatedness.

I guess I fear that "Repent" has become "Gee, I'm sorry." That is good only in that it results in changed behavior, which to me is what the word really means. Repentance is more than a revved-up emotional state. It's a life change.

In a moment we will draw together around this table. If we find it hard to believe in the future of hope from God, then look to this table, this meal. This meal is a sign of God's love for us made real. We can taste the bread and wine and in that moment draw hope and confidence that God has come to us, still is with us, and will come again to us.

May it be so Amen.

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