

Los Angeles Diocesan Convention, *Faith & Our Future*  
5 December 2008, 12 noon  
Mark 1:1-8

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Our country is consumed with transition right now – who's going to get what position in the cabinet, who are the players going to be in this next administration? And it's not just Americans who are watching. The surprising thing about this election has been the degree of international interest – the world has been eager for a sense that we aren't going to be quite so unilateral in our foreign policy. Whatever your politics, and however you voted, it's been a very important international conversation. It's also had consequences for us as a church, and our role in the larger body of the Anglican Communion. As a church, we are suddenly perceived more positively, because of the decision of our secular electorate. In a surprising way, this election has been seen as preparing the way for a different global future.

John the Baptizer was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight. It's a ministry you and I share as followers of Jesus, who was himself baptized by John. We share that same tradition – a willingness to dream God's dream for a world where the poor and the weak receive justice and equity.

We are a people of the future, we look forward, with hope, to a future where God's dream for creation becomes reality. We may not expect to see that dream fully realized in our lifetimes, but we still live in that expectation. That's really what Advent is about – living with the kind of hope that's bigger than the world thinks is reasonable, a hope for a different and more peaceable world.

That's actually what this diocese is about. Your strategic plan is a local vision for what the reign of God could look like in this place, particularly how the communities of faith that form this diocese might begin to build that world of peace and justice here in the southland. We are all, together, part of that ministry of John Baptist's – making the way straight for God's coming kingdom. So, what does a straight road look like?

That straight road is what Isaiah specifies – justice for the poor and equity for the meek. It means that an immigrant doesn't have to walk a much steeper road than a longer-term resident. It means that children who grow up in poorer families aren't deprived of first-rate educations. It means that people don't have radically different access to health care based on their ability to pay. It means that all pregnant women can get adequate prenatal care, so that the children they bear have a more equal start in life. That straight road doesn't take detours at national borders, to avoid the untreated sewage on one side. Those who build this road provide adequate waste treatment, as well as clean water, decent housing, hospitals, and schools all along the road – for we remember that God was born among us in a poor and occupied land, to parents who were at least temporarily homeless. The road

we're meant to build is supposed to be available to all of God's children – to folks in wheelchairs and strollers as well as those who have a vigorous and lengthy stride.

The question for this convention, and the question for each congregation represented here, is how you're going to build the section of road in your neighborhood. What detours and potholes need to be fixed? What rockpiles or obstacles in the road need to be removed? In Greek the word for a roadblock is scandal. The same word is used for temptation, the thing that keeps us from moving straight down that road toward God. What scandalous reality stands in the way of God's coming reign in your neck of the woods? Your section of road is going to be slightly different from the one ten miles away, or Route 66 in Arizona. What do the roads through the communities around here, like I-5 or I-15, need to look like – besides broader and more open for traffic?

The ability of the congregations and faith communities of this diocese to build a level and straight road is indeed good news for this part of the world. Your invitation to join the throng passing along that road will change lives and transform societies. You're already building that road through different ethnic and immigrant communities, and posting road signs in nine or ten different languages. You're building rest stops and way stations for weary travelers – the diocesan retreat center, camps and conference centers that minister to tired souls and those in need of re-creation. Your connections to El Salvador, Belize, Jerusalem, and Ghana provide a fast lane for the love of God to pass between nations.

Perhaps the most urgent question just now is how will you, in congregations and as a diocese, provide sign posts that offer hope for the journey? Isaiah reminds a desolate people that God is always at work, even when the night seems long and dark, when home is a very long way away and the road seems interminable. At a time like this, with economic woes spreading like fire before the Santa Ana winds, that kind of good news is even more essential. Your work – indeed, all our work in this body of Christ – is to point to the hopeful light that the darkness will not overcome, and the unexpected child who is visible evidence of God's surpassing love for us all, without exception.

That light shines in roadworks like Mama's Hot Tamales in MacArthur Park, and now Mama's in Pasadena, sharing the feast and offering constructive hope for employment. That light shines in IRIS, helping wanderers to find new homes and hope for a new and more abundant life. That light shines in your several Canterbury communities, offering companionship and meaning to young adults on college campuses. That light is spread through the work of the Episcopal Community Credit Union, bringing hope and possibility to those who have little or no hope elsewhere. A loan from that credit union helped start Mama's Hot Tamales. Your own deposits in that Credit Union could help light the way down other roads, and help more to find the way home.

Your light is also going to light the road for all the thousands who will flock here next July, who together will seek to direct the next three years of road building by the greater Episcopal Church. Your hospitality, and the roadbed you lay in the months leading up to that gathering, will have a significant impact on the road that can be built. The kind of paving material and road signs you offer, in the form of musicians, volunteers, and the forms of hospitality you offer to General Convention, will go on to shape the road that's built for

all the eager travelers who will try to travel homeward across the globe in the coming years. The good news of Jesus, who was called the roadway by his early followers, will be shared more widely because of the work you do here – today, tomorrow, in the next six months, and for years to come.

Willie Nelson's words are still a pretty good summary of what that road looks like when it straightens out into joy for the world: "on the road again, just can't wait to get on the road again. The life I love is making music with my friends. I can't wait to get on the road again." We're all invited to make music, with friends new and old, to build a world of joy and abundance for our neighbors, to meet God in every face, and to get on the road that leads everyone home to God.