

Sermon, 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 6, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

“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.” (Isaiah 40:3-4)

Chapters 40-55 of *Isaiah* seem to date from the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1) With these opening words to chapter 40, we get to be flies on the wall during a conversation among members of a divine council. The speakers, possibly angelic beings, are not identified, although it seems the council includes the poet-prophet who wrote down these series of oracles. My first year of seminary, I took a sequence of classes on the Hebrew Bible. When it came time to study the Latter Prophets—the cornerstones of which are the formidable Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—my professor encouraged us to create aphorisms to help us identify and remember the essential attributes of each. This is what I wrote for *Second Isaiah*:

Second Isaiah.

“Comfort, comfort, ye my people...
Get thee up into the high mountains...”:
soundtrack to winter,
springs in dry land.

The people of Israel had been in exile for many generations and existed as a mere remnant. Judah and the temple in Jerusalem had been ruined. The usual interpretation of such events by prophets such as Jeremiah would be that the people were under judgement by God, should repent, and seek forgiveness. Prophesying woe was considered the hallmark of a true prophet. False prophets, on the other hand, were marked by words of reassurance. The startling thing about this oracle from *Isaiah* is not just that it speaks of tenderness towards a suffering people, but that it is accepted as genuine prophecy! God seems to work through a political event to secure release for the people. In 539 BCE, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon. Cyrus turned out to be a somewhat enlightened ruler who chose to win over those he subdued by allowing latitude in religious observance. For the Jews this came as a promise from Cyrus that they could return to Judah and rebuild the temple.

“A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3) There is a wilderness to be traversed between Babylon and Judah. When have the people of Israel traveled through a wilderness before? The motif of the wilderness is powerful throughout Scripture. In Exodus the people are led through it with pillars of fire and pillars of cloud. Moses encounters a burning bush, Jacob a ladder. Even when Jesus is

tempted in the wilderness, he is tended by angels and animals. In the wilderness of *Isaiah* 40, there is a highway. It is not just any highway: it is a highway that has been made straight by extraordinary means. Valleys are lifted up, mountains made low, uneven and rough ground made level. God works with Creation itself so that God may return to us, and we to God.

The smooth path rising unexpectedly out of the wilderness of our sorrows is not the only paradoxical heralded event in *Isaiah* 40. The poet-prophet also tells us that God will come with might, “and his arm rules for him.” This seems to imply a powerful warrior. And yet it becomes clear in the next lines that God comes as a compassionate God. First, Isaiah says God’s recompense comes before him. ‘Recompense,’ according to the OED, is “reparation made for a wrong done; atonement or satisfaction for a misdeed or offence.” Israel and we are released, restored, and recreated. It is God’s nature to do this.

Second, God provides ongoing care for humans and for all of creation. “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 [parent] sheep.” In chapter six of the Gospel of Mark we hear that Jesus has compassion for the crowds “...because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” (*Mark* 6:34) Perhaps Jesus had *Isaiah* in mind...

It seems so counter-intuitive that God's presence is to be sought in the wilderness. Is it really in "trackless wastes" that we expect to find food, water, comfort—the way home? At Thanksgiving I usually travel several hours by car to spend the holiday with cousins in northern Pennsylvania. We weren't able to gather this year, but this trip still came to mind. It is a beautiful drive in many ways—but it has its wilderness aspects! On the way home on the NY Thruway I usually pull over to the Sloatsburg Travel Plaza to put gas in the car, powder my nose, and grab something to eat. I love this rest stop because it has a covered parking garage. (I ignore the irony of its being called a plaza...) I took refuge there in a snowstorm once, and ever since it has represented a certain predictable assurance of comfort and safety: a straight highway, level ground.

We may spend a lot of our energy trying to discern our path. We may wonder if we are on a path at all, much less the one meant for us. However, there is something about seeking the path that actually ensures that we are on it. All week the visual image that has stayed with me is the lights of a runway that guide incoming planes,. I have always loved landing at an airport at night, seeing the lights opening up in front of the plane: magical! Depending on where I am sitting on the plane, I may also see the flashing landing lights of the plane itself.

In our passage from Isaiah it says: 'A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God..."'

(Isaiah 40:3) The way is *God's* way; the straight highway is for our God. This led me to wonder: what if we *are* the path? What if this highway is within our hearts? In our Psalm we hear: "Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet." (Psalm 85:13) And in the Epistle we hear: "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." (2 Peter 3:14-15a)

The peace that "surpasses understanding" is a gift from God in Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus says, "Peace be with you," several times when he appears to the disciples. (John 20:21, 26) Paul's greeting in his pastoral letters is almost always, "Grace to you, and peace from God..." In Galatians, Paul tells us peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Advent is not primarily a penitential season. However, it is a time when we prepare our hearts. What do we need to do to smooth out those "rough places" so that God's peace may come to us? In the Twelve Step program, I think of steps six and seven. First we have to be "entirely ready" to have God remove our shortcomings. Then we ask in humility that they be removed. This process does require that we go into the wilderness places of our hearts. *We need not be afraid.* "The Lord is not slow about his promise..." (2 Peter 3:9) Once again, we wait for the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." (Mark 1:1)

There's a Harold Arlen song that is featured in the lovely Fred Astaire film

“The Sky's the Limit” that expresses perfectly what I want to say:

“This moment, this minute
And each second in it
Will leave a glow upon the sky
And as time goes by, it will never die

This will be my shining hour
Calm and happy and bright
And in my dreams, your face will flower
Through the darkness of the night

Like the lights of home before me
Or an angel, who's watching o'er me
This will be my shining hour
'til I'm with you again.”