

12.8.2024 Advent 2 (Lessons & Carols)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 40:1-8; Mark 1:1-15 (sermon texts)

“You are messengers: Prepare the way!”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Advent is a season of preparing the way for the birth of Jesus Christ. On the Second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist cries out in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “*Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.*”

So I might ask, “What do you do to prepare for Christmas?” This time of the year has many traditions like today’s *Service of Lessons & Carols*. Handel’s *Messiah* is another such tradition, and just two days ago over 250 people filled this sanctuary to hear the *Messiah* performed by the UNC Charlotte Chorale and Orchestra. Indeed, the opening words of the *Messiah* come from today’s first reading, Isaiah 40 – “*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.*” Isaiah’s words remind us that God comes into the world not with retribution and judgment but with comfort and lovingkindness through his Son, Jesus Christ.

As we prepare for Christmas, we would do well to remember that God comes to comfort this world with a love that can never be extinguished. During Advent, we prepare our hearts with God’s word and with song because God’s word and song of praise lift our often-heavy hearts with good news that transforms the mountains, valleys, and uneven places of life into a highway for our God.

So, I again ask, “What do you do to prepare for Christmas?” What do you do, amid the darkness and brokenness of this world, that prepares you once again to receive Jesus Christ into the manger of your heart? Our church schedule, of course, alerts us to the many services and concerts that can lift our flagging spirits, but what do you do that prepares the way of the Lord into your heart?

This year, the Congregational Life folks are again offering devotional booklets for Advent. If you have not yet received a copy, there are still some copies available on the reception desk in the Gathering Place. Perhaps the best way of preparing is to make time during your day to again welcome Jesus, the living Word, to dwell anew in you.

Isaiah’s words of comfort are God’s promise that you can rely upon amid the many things in this world that are broken, cruel, and divisive. Early Christians associated Isaiah’s words with John the Baptist and the coming of Christ. Isaiah speaks about the uneven and rough places in this world, writing, “*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.*”

The valleys, mountains, uneven, and rough places of Isaiah represent not simply geographic topographies to be overcome; they are the ever-present and difficult terrains of life – the political, social, and psychological worlds we inhabit. We live in a world of mountain-like challenges and valleys of despair; many live with the uneven and rough inequalities and injustices of life. Jesus is born to overcome the towering challenges and deep despairs of life; he lives to help us lift our neighbor from those uneven and unjust places in this world.

Isaiah is describing how God himself will work in human history, creating equity and justice for Israel who was in exile in Babylon. Isaiah's words must have seemed foolish and impossible to a people in held captivity. Yet Isaiah prophesied that the highway of God would run through the terrain of human history. Israel's freedom from exile came about when King Cyrus issued a decree allowing the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Early Christians also saw the highway of God running from Isaiah's words through John the Baptist, to the ministry of Jesus, his announcement of the kingdom of God, and into the ongoing work of the church.

Yet I sometimes think it is perhaps harder for us to believe in God at work in history than the Israelites in Isaiah's age. Though our worldview and scientific advancement exceeds theirs, though we have come to see ever smaller sub-atomic particles in the physical world, we have also become jaded and cynical about a divine potential also hidden within human beings. Though we have discovered an understanding of our own human history hidden within our genetics, many find it hard to understand God's Spirit also dwelling hidden in our flesh. It seems as if few truly think that God is overcoming the mountains and valleys, the uneven and rough places of human life. Yet this is the prophecy of Isaiah that continues to speak to us today, preparing humanity for the impossible possibility of the incarnation of God in our humanity.

God enters human history in the birth of a child named Jesus who lives now raised and active in the world. Invisibly, at times, like the sub-atomic and genetic data alive in you, he lives to shape you into a new creation. He lives in you so that you might lift others out of valleys of despair, that you might lower the mountains of hatred separating human beings from one another. He lives in you that you might help level life's inequalities and injustices that many face simply for being who God has created them to be.

The One who makes straight a highway to God is named Jesus. He himself is the kingdom of God come near to us. He welcomes the outcast, the sinful, and the oppressed, and he overcomes hatred with his love. In his body, the church, we say, "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand*" by welcoming all people to a *metanoia* of repentance. *Metanoia*, or repentance, is the changing of our thinking and the direction we walk by traveling together on his highway.

As we are encouraged to the repentance of discipleship, Isaiah also reminds us of the brevity of our lives, writing: *“all flesh is grass ...surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flower fades.”* Our lives *are indeed brief*. What we leave behind of importance will not be what we have built or made; it will not be how much we have earned or the power we have wielded; rather, our life’s meaning will be in how we have been God’s messenger in this world.

During Advent, prepare the way. You are his messengers in this world. How have you lifted others from valleys of despair, overcome mountain-like divisions to empower others, leveled the uneven places by welcoming and accepting others as sisters and brothers in Christ? As Jesus has lifted you onto God’s highway, drawing you into his kingdom, how have you lifted and welcomed others in his name?

*“The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever”* (1 Jn. 2:17). May you be remembered as a messenger who changed the uneven terrain of this world by lifting and raising others with the hope of Jesus Christ.

His incarnation continues in you. This Advent season, and all your life, you will know his advent by the holy harmony which his coming makes in you.

The time is fulfilled! You are his messengers: Prepare the way! Amen.