

“Prepare the way of the Lord”

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

On the Second Sunday of Advent, we hear the prophet Isaiah’s voice, crying, “*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*”

For many people, Isaiah’s words are so associated with Handel’s Messiah that we perhaps even hear the melody being sung in our heads when we read these words.

Through these words, Isaiah is reminding Israel – and us – that the Lord God is a God who works in history through human agency. God is still speaking to us, and to all people, in the wilderness of sin and death with words of comfort and hope.

Isaiah 40 begins with words of hope, “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...cry to her that she has served her term, and that her penalty is paid...*” These words are familiar yet also ancient, and we might be forgiven for asking, “What is Isaiah referring to?” Isaiah is talking about real world events, but to answer this, we must recount a bit of biblical history.

In the sixth century BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar II’s army carried away Jewish people to Babylonia. This is known as the Babylonian Captivity, which lasted for 70 years. The reasons for Israel’s exile and captivity in Babylonia are well-known. The penalty, as Isaiah calls it, that Israel has paid was God’s judgement upon Israel for abandoning their covenant with Yahweh. Israel had left the worship of Yahweh and adopted the religious practices of other nations. They broke God’s commandments by worshiping other idols, by not keeping the Sabbath law, and by ignoring God’s commands of justice for the foreigner and stranger. Israel had turned a deaf ear the prophets that God had sent to speak to Israel.

Isaiah is prophesying that Israel will be restored to Jerusalem after their seventy-year captivity in Babylonia. The God that Isaiah writes about works in human history. God used the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, to release Israel from their captivity in Babylonia. King Cyrus allowed Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, and restored to Israel the vessels of the Temple that had been taken away by Nebuchadnezzar. Just five chapters later in Isaiah (45:1ff), God calls Cyrus, “*his anointed*”, which in Hebrew means God’s “*mashiyach*” or *messiah*, “the anointed one.” In other words, God anointed a king to be God’s human agent of mercy and love for Israel.

What I am endeavoring to say is that the God who worked in Israel’s history is the God who sent his Son, the living Word, the *Logos*, and long-awaited Messiah, to restore and to forgive – not only Israel – but all nations of this world. During Advent, we are people who, along with

all Christians in every nation and language, continue to await the advent of the Messiah, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This is why we retell the stories of God's work in history. During Advent, the words of the Bible help us to imagine how and where God is continuing to work and to speak in human history today – history that we are living and making.

Yet as we await his coming again, Christ also lives raised in each moment of your life. He stands before you as “the eternal now” alive in history. Jesus Christ *is* the Kingdom of God drawn near to you, so close that his kingdom dwells within you. You await him, yet he is always with you. Keep watch for him.

Today's gospel reading from Mark continues to retell God's salvation history. God sent John the Baptist as a messenger to prepare the way of the Jesus. As God worked in King Cyrus to release Israel from Babylonia, God worked through John to prepare the way for Jesus.

John says, “*I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” John is talking about something historically real and verifiable. This isn't some “pie in the sky” idea. People who have been given the Spirit are for real. You know the faith that burns inside of you. It is real. You have met people who radiate the fire of God's light and love. Like the words, “*Comfort, O comfort my people,*” you have probably also offered and received words of comfort and forgiveness. Words that came from a very deep place – from the fire of the Holy Spirit alive in you.

God is still speaking. God continues to work and speak in history *through you*. God continues to speak in the wilderness moments of your life. You are his messenger in the wilderness of this world. In Holy Baptism you were sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ to be messengers in the wilderness of this world.

Lord knows this world is a wilderness and a very uneven and rough place. It is a place of violence and hatred. It is a place of discrimination and oppression. It is a place of nationalism and war. For all of our modernity and progress, the human heart remains as selfish and broken as when Israel first broke God's covenant. We continue to worship idols: money and possessions, power and success, people and leaders – we can even worship our own nation more than we worship the nearness of God's kingdom. We struggle with the same problems of the heart that Israel struggled with.

God spoke through Jesus' baptism. After Jesus came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and God's voice said, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” Like Jesus, in Holy Baptism you have been called a beloved child of God and given the Spirit. We are baptized into Jesus' baptism. This is why our font is shaped like a dove which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The font always appears to be hovering above us as a

symbol of the Spirit who is always with us.

Yet after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. Though God called Jesus his beloved, he didn't coddle Jesus but rather led him into the wilderness to face temptation. There is a Japanese phrase, 「可愛子には旅をさせよ」, which means, "Make the beloved child travel." Like Jesus, the Spirit is given to lead and protect us on our travels in life's wilderness places, and also that we might help others in their wilderness moments. When you feel alone, broken, or distraught by temptation, know that the Spirit is with you. Call upon the Spirit, who will help you so that you might also help others.

Jesus was also given the Spirit so that he might proclaim the nearness of the kingdom of God. Without the Spirit, no one can proclaim or point to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit is with you for a reason – so that you might be Jesus' messengers of hope and love in the wilderness of this world.

Revealing the nearness of the kingdom might be as simple as making a phone call to someone or writing them a note; visiting someone in the hospital; or welcoming a stranger or a foreigner who lives in the wilderness of a new land. God is still speaking. God is speaking through you.

God needs your voice, because it is the spoken word of God that carries the Spirit. "*Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news*," reminds us that Jesus didn't write books – or anything. He simply spoke. His disciples recorded his words because these words changed them. Jesus proclaimed God's word and it transformed people.

Never underestimate the Holy Spirit alive in your voice; alive in your actions; alive in you.

Prepare the way of the Lord!

Jesus is coming, and he is already here in you. Amen.