

Advent 2
Isaiah 40:1-11
December 10, 2023

(Isa 40:1-11 NRSV) Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. {2} 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.

{3} A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

{4} 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. {5} Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

{6} 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. {7} The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. {8} The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. {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, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" {10} See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. {11} 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.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

For the price of his three goats, Dashrath Manjhi, bought the sledgehammer, crowbar, and chisels he needed to make a way, where there was no way. It was 35 miles around the base of a 300 ft. mountain to the nearest hospital or school from his isolated village in India. As the crow flies, it was less than 9 miles. That difference was the difference between life and death for his wife, who after a tragic accident, was unable to get to the hospital in time to be saved.

So, Manjhi set out to cut a road out of the mountain that stood between his village and vital services. Every morning, he got up and plowed fields to earn a living, and every afternoon and night he labored on that mountain, using nothing but hand tools. As you might imagine, the people of his village thought he had gone mad. But he persisted and devised techniques for splitting boulders and chiseling stone. He set out every day in in what at-first, appeared to be an exercise in futility; every day for twenty-two years. He came to be known as the "mountain man" and over time, other villagers came to help him with the road. They even protested on his behalf when the police tried to arrest him.

In 1982, he completed the road. It is 360 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 25-foot rock walls tower up the sides. The road is a testament to the anger, grief, and determination of a poor, landless, laborer, undeterred by criticism, naysayers, and solid rock obstacles.

In our passage for today we hear, *"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."* (v. 3). Tear down the high places, raise up the low places. Clear out the obstacles. Straighten the curves. In the wilderness, make a highway for God.

I imagine Manjhi staring at the mountain that stood between the life and death of his wife. He could have shaken his head in defeat and said, "This is the way it is. This obstacle is too great." But he heard another voice saying, "prepare the way." And piece by piece, he chiseled his way through it. He reduced immovable boulders to rubble by heating them with fire and then pouring water on them, which meant he had to carry the wood, and haul the water. Jesus once said, "...if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:2b) Jesus never said how long it might take, or how it would callous your hands and make your body ache. Perhaps faith is the ability to see beyond the obstacles before us. Perhaps faith is picking up that hammer and chisel or moving that first stone. Perhaps the faith Jesus describes is the ability to see the end result, despite naysayers and resistance.

On this Sunday, as we light the candle of peace, it is hard to imagine anything beyond the conflict and strife of war, and violence, and poverty, and prejudice, and injustice, and anxiety, and hatred that stands like a mountain between life and death. Visions of God's shalom for us and all creation seems like a pipe dream. Who am I to take on this mountain? What power do I have? Yet, according to Jesus, it is not power that we need. It is faith.

The prophets challenge us to envision the coming of God's reign on earth, where peace prevails, where everyone has enough, where the inequities that divide us are leveled, where the conflict between us is healed. To keep this vision of peace alive, there is a church in Canada that has a tradition of lighting a peace candle each Sunday. As the candle is lit, these words are spoken: *"Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice. Peace is what happens when those who have much do not have too much, and those who have little do not have too little, when the old and the very young are safe and secure, parents can feed their children and themselves, and all have the opportunity for meaningful work in their community. Let us pray and work for this kind of peace."*¹

The prophets cry out in the wilderness of despair and longing – telling us to prepare the way for God and God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. And the work of preparing the way begins right here, with each one of us. Peace doesn't magically happen. We're not preparing candy-cane lane. Peace requires repentance, humility, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, service, and faith enough to know it is possible despite the mountain before us.

¹ <https://ralphconnor.ca/sermon-sunday-december-3-2023-isaiah-40-1-11-advent-ii/>

In the gospel of Luke, the story of John's birth before Jesus' birth. John is born to the aging couple of Zechariah and Elizabeth. When Zechariah gazes upon his newborn son he bursts into song and prophecies:

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:76-79)

John grows up to become, John the Baptist. He is the prophet, a voice, crying out in the wilderness, calling people to repent and return to ways of God. This is how we build that highway. This is how we prepare the way. By chiseling away at the things that cause division and hardship. This is how we prepare the way, by addressing the fear and anxiety that too often drive our decisions. This is how we prepare the way, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

The stories of the birth of Jesus recognize Jesus as the inaugurator of God's peace on earth. Jesus' birth is not the end of the story. Jesus is our guide for preparing the way for God's coming reign of peace. Jesus offended and called out abusers of power and holders of privilege. He blessed the vulnerable and outcasts with acceptance and healing. He taught about breaking cycles of violence with radical love. He called those who followed him to lay down their lives and give their all for the kingdom – God's peace – for all.

Jesus had his naysayers and critics. But there were also those who came to see what he saw – what could be – a way where there is no way – a highway to life. And on this second Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of peace, we strain our imaginations to see it too. Though the end is nowhere in sight, and the obstacles are great, with the eyes of faith, we can see what is on the other side.

Some of the villagers call Manjhi a fool, telling him that what he was trying to accomplish was impossible. But others caught his vision and joined him.

Some called Jesus a fool. Some still do. Do we really believe there is a way to peace? We can despair, criticize, and do nothing. Or we can sell our goats and buy a hammer and chisel. The invitation awaits.