

“Preparing for Something More”

Isaiah 40:1–11

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(singing) “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare ye the way of the Lord...” These are the words John the Baptist sings in the musical *Godspell*, after blowing on a horn — awkwardly, I might add. It is his big entrance near the beginning of the play. They are also words we find in the reading from Isaiah 40. They are words quoted by Mark as a way of introducing the ministry of John the Baptist. And they are words that have shaped our stewardship emphasis this year. Prepare the way of the Lord, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord... then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together!”

It sounds like a worthy task and a hopeful message, but what exactly does it mean? What is the way of the Lord and how do we prepare for it? Our first thoughts this time of year are of the birth of Jesus and what we need to do to prepare our hearts for him, and this is part of the answer. But to get at a more complete answer and to inform fully this part of it, we need to examine a bit more closely the reading from Isaiah which begins all of this talk about preparing the way.

As many of you know, the book of Isaiah does not describe the ministry of just one prophet. The timeframe, subject matter, and tone simply do not fit into one person’s life. Generally speaking, chapters 1–39 describe Isaiah’s time, roughly 742–701 BCE, while chapters 40–66 come from the time of Cyrus of Persia (539 BCE) and later. Many scholars believe that the words we have read today from chapter 40 mark the calling of a new prophet, one my Old Testament professor, Page Kelley, referred to as the Great Prophet of the Exile.

This prophet is called in these verses to proclaim a new message of hope for the people and to help them embrace it. After decades of judgment, God is extending comfort to the Israelites. The prophet is to speak tenderly to their hearts, a term that is used to express reassurance

but also one that expresses affection to a beloved. Perhaps both understandings apply. God is reassuring God's beloved. God is not only forgiving the people; God will care for the people like a shepherd, gathering lambs and gently leading the mother sheep.

Thus, the way the prophet is to prepare, like some ancient herald going before a sovereign and announcing his/her reign, is not just the path back to the Promised Land, but an intimate manner of relating to God, as beloved, as a people cared for with deep affection. He will do this in the wilderness, which refers not simply to the land between Babylon and Judea, but to the state of being separated from God's love. Into this dark place of isolation, very much like our own right now, God is going to shine the light of God's love.

Yet there is something else about this way of the Lord we need to note. It is summarized with the phrase, "Then the glory of Lord shall be revealed (40:5)." It is a reversal of what happens in Ezekiel 11:23 where the glory of the Lord departs Jerusalem, but it is more than a reversal. The prophetic message is that rather than just returning to the Israelites, the glory of the Lord — God's presence and love — shall be revealed and *all people* shall see it together. The new thing God is doing, the new thing people need to prepare for, is not just for them. It is for everyone.

It is an inclusive message that is proclaimed multiple times by this prophet in the latter chapters of Isaiah (42:6–7; 45:22; 49:6). It is a message we believe is fulfilled most completely with the birth of Christ, a Savior for all people. And it is the message that we are to prepare the way for — the message of God's inclusive love for all.

So, how do we prepare the way of the Lord, this way of this Lord? It begins with our own lives. We cannot prepare the way for others to experience what we have not experienced. So, we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ in a fuller way. We do everything we can through times of prayer and meditation, worship, study, and devotion, to develop a more intimate personal relationship with the God who enters this world in the form of a fragile child. We don't want to be found lamenting the fact that there was no room in the inn for the Christ to be born while there is not enough room for Christ in our hearts.

In his baptismal instructions, the fourth-century Bishop of Antioch, John Chrysostom, compared the process of spiritual formation to occupancy in a hotel. To make room for the new occupant — the Spirit of Christ — the new believer preparing for baptism needs to remove the old occupant — the devil or powers of evil. Though we might use different language, such is our task not just at the beginning of the journey in baptism but every step along the way. There is a constant need to make more room for the Spirit of Christ in our thoughts, feelings and lives, and this requires setting aside other things that take up room.

Yet there is more to our responsibility of preparation because the intent is for all to see the glory of God. We are not just preparing our hearts. We are also preparing the way for others. How do we do this? If we are to follow the example of the prophet, with a combination of two seemingly contradictory resources — tenderness and strength. The prophet speaks tenderly to the people, extending mercy and love, yet he also lifts up his voice with strength, saying, “Here is your God!” Preparing the way for Christ’s realm requires tenderness and strength.

Tenderness is revealed in the tireless efforts of Toy Joy this year, finding a way even during COVID-19 to make sure hundreds of families experience some joy this Christmas. Tenderness is revealed in the many ways we are looking after each other with calls, cards, prayers, and safely distanced visits. Tenderness is revealed in the heroic efforts of HOG elves, videographers and AV wizards enabling us to experience the Hanging of the Greens, not exactly like we have in normal times, but to experience it still. “Comfort my people,” God says to the prophet, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Sometimes our calling is to speak a tender word as we prepare the way for people to experience God’s inclusive love more fully.

Other times we are called to lift up our voices with strength. Consider the persistent challenge of racial injustice which has raised its ugly head again this year in our national life. We may have different perspectives on some of the details, and thoughtful people can envision slightly different solutions, but what cannot be disputed by anyone in touch with reality is that life in America is still different for people with dark skin, especially in the criminal justice system.

White parents have no need to have the talk with our white children. They face plenty of dangers in this world but not because of the color of their skin. Whatever we make of this as Americans, as followers of Jesus, as those who are called to prepare the way for his reign, we have a calling to do something, and that something requires not only tenderness but strength, a willingness to lift up our voices. This does not mean we are hostile to law enforcement people. We know, appreciate and work with them. It means we pray for them and work with them to make changes in our culture and in our own hearts.

But it is ever a work in progress for all of us. There is a fascinating scene in an episode of this season of “The Crown.” And let me just say — this has been a difficult season to watch. But in this episode Queen Elizabeth II is trying to convince Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to join the international effort to impose economic sanctions on South Africa during Apartheid. It is a rare exception to the Crown’s practice over the past century of never expressing an opinion. And in the end, though she is courageous in taking a stand against racial oppression in this moment, the Queen eventually backs down in public. But for a moment at least she lifts up her voice with strength.

It is easy to be critical of her, though far easier to be critical of Margaret Thatcher, but how many times have we finally found the courage to speak up only to back down due to pressure or simply getting distracted by other things? Preparing the way of the Lord, the way of inclusive love and justice for all that is seen not only in the prophetic words of Isaiah but in the ministry of the one who is born in an animal shed in Bethlehem, requires tenderness and strength. Tenderness comes more naturally for most of us — that is fine — but strength is needed too. And so, even if it is a work in progress, even if we find our voice and temporarily lose it, we need to keep trying to use it. The prophet’s calling includes a vision of valleys being lifted up and mountains coming down. That kind of change requires tenderness and strength.

One other thing I would add is that if the glory of the Lord is going to be revealed to all people, there will need to be many more people than just us preparing the way. The good news is there is an entire body of Christ to fulfill the calling, and we are connected to a network of faithful

people through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who are preparing the way all over the world. And this is the time of year when we emphasize the Global Missions Offering through which we support CBF field personnel.

In a few moments, we will hear from Laura and Carson Foushee who are returning to Japan this week to continue their witness to God's love in Christ there. This Wednesday evening during the Centerpoint seminar on Zoom we will hear again from Marc and Kim Wyatt who are working with immigrants and refugees right here in the Triangle, extending concrete expressions of God's inclusive love to some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Our financial support of these good folks and many others who prepare the way does not by itself fulfill our calling, but it is a significant part of it.

(singing) "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare ye the way of the Lord..." It's not just a simple song in a musical. It's not just the calling of an ancient prophet and a long-haired, locust-eating preacher name John. It is our calling today — not just to long for something more but to prepare the way for it, so that the glory of the Lord may be revealed and all people shall see it together.