

## **“Paving the Way”**

*Advent 2017 – part 2*

Isaiah 40:1-11

You are in the right place this morning. Take a look around you. We are here to worship God together. We are here to be in community. Each one of us has given up something valuable to be here today: time. It is a sacrifice we freely make because we know how much God loves us. If you are here for the first time, and you think it is only accidental that you are even sitting in your pew, remember this: your presence is no surprise to God. You are here for a purpose: to worship the Lord Almighty.

I invite you to pray with me.

God, before whom all hearts are open, we gather in this place to call on your name. We are your people, and you are our Redeemer, our Rock in whom we trust. As we worship you, Father, Son, and Spirit, bring your power down upon us. Change our hearts; mold our wills to conform to the greatest desires of your heart. Help us to know the joy of serving you. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

My family had to drive through some snowy roads lately. I'm usually good about driving in northern Michigan winters, but sometimes, I have a little bad luck. Like one year, I took my Prius down a dirt road with the intention of finding a place to do a little cross-country skiing. Everything was fine as I was driving downhill, but when the road turned up, I had no chance. It seems like the slightest incline causes my car to slip. Even this week, I could barely get my car out of the parking lot here at church, because the ground was not perfectly flat.

Driving this week really made me notice every single obstacle that prevents us from reaching our destination. Fallen trees. Black ice. Steep hills and valleys. If you have to drive on snow and ice, you know, a flat, clear road is always better than dealing with ups and downs and curves and other obstacles.

Before I was a pastor, I studied civil engineering, so I know a little bit about road construction. I know how much energy it takes to build a level road. If you are building a brand new road through the wilderness, you have to clear the land, using huge earthmovers to flatten out the hills and fill in the valleys. If you have ever done any “off-roading,” you know, making a path in the wilderness is hard.

I used to read Isaiah 40, verse 3, like this: “A voice calls out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way for the Lord!” Notice, the quotes identify the location of the voice, not the road. The voice is in the wilderness, right? Then I read some other versions, and I saw that the sentence had another meaning. “A voice calls out, ‘In the wilderness make a way for the Lord!’” In other words, build a road through the wilderness, so that God can approach. That’s a slightly different view, isn’t it? The thing about wilderness is, there are no roads! You have to build them. You have to overcome obstacles in the wilderness, like mountains, canyons, bandits, wild animals, and monster snow drifts.

Why would Isaiah want someone to do build a road in the wilderness? We want to drive in the city or take the expressway. No one really wants to go to a place where there are no roads at all, do they?

There are some clues in the rest of Isaiah to help us understand. First of all, Isaiah is proclaiming comfort to Jerusalem. He is speaking to the exiles of Israel, who lived in Babylon as slaves. If anyone felt like they were stuck in the

wilderness, it was them. This road Isaiah wanted built was to bring the Israelites back out of the wilderness, bring them back home to Jerusalem.

These Israelites were in pretty bad shape. They were fading, like the grass of the field, scorched by the hot wind. Have you seen the awful fires in southern California? That’s how the Israelites felt, spiritually. Dried up, burned up, lifeless.

That is the way a lot of people feel in this world. Lost. Lifeless. Stuck in a huge canyon with no way up. Lost in the wilderness. Trapped on a high mountain with no way down. This can be because of health issues. It can be because of addiction. It can be because of family dysfunction. You can feel rejected by those you love. You can even feel rejected by God. Trust me, this is what the people reading Isaiah thought. God had left them. God had placed obstacles much worse than a foot of snow between them and their homeland. If you have ever felt lost, you can relate to the exiles.

When I am driving on treacherous roads late at night, I feel a lot safer if I have a guide. If I turn my little GPS on, even though I know where I am going, I am reassured by that little voice. “In 500 feet, turn left onto Bellaire Highway.” I know someone has prepared a way for me to get back home. The roads have been plowed and salted. There are some street lights. These things I take for granted nine months out of the year...OK, six months out of the year in Bellaire...those landmarks and that GPS voice reassure me that I can reach my destination. Someone made a way for me.

John the Baptist was like the GPS for 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Jews. While they weren’t in exile, they sure felt like God had forgotten that the Romans were oppressing them. This is how the gospel of Mark describes John’s mission to these people.

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> the Son of God, <sup>2</sup>as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way"—*

*<sup>3</sup>"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.'"*

*<sup>4</sup>And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Mark 1:1-5)*

John thought of himself as the voice calling out of the wilderness. But he was also the guide, the one who paved the road in the wilderness. He showed the way for people to leave the wilderness of their sins. He prepared the way for Jesus by helping the people repent. John shouted the good news so that they could hear it.

Go back to Isaiah 40 again. God has great news for those people coming out of the wilderness. In verse 2, Isaiah says their hard times, their punishment has been completed. In verse 4, he promises the rough ways will be smoothed, mountains leveled, valleys filled in. In verse 5, he promises all people will see God's glory. In verse 8, he promises that God's word endures forever. That's good news!

If you look at verse 9, you should notice a bit of irony. The messengers are supposed to go up on a mountain to shout the good news. What mountain? It turns out, not all mountains have been leveled. There is still one mountain that serves as a landmark, while all the rest of the way has been made level. It is the mountain of God. Figuratively, it is God himself. Isaiah proclaims, "He is here!" God has brought his comfort. God has brought his power. He is both a ruling king

and a gentle shepherd. It is not often you find a powerful leader that is strong and compassionate. More often, we think a leader has to be either one or the other. The good news is, God is both. God is our mountain.

What is the world looking for this Christmas? Doesn't everyone want to hear some good news? Don't people want to know that they are not lost, they are not forgotten, they are not stuck? Christmas is the time to proclaim that God has made a way for us, through his son, Jesus, the Savior. We need to get ourselves ready to receive him.

One of my favorite carols is Joy to the World. In the first verse, we sing, “Let every heart prepare him room.” Christmas is not just about lighting a few candles, singing some songs, and opening a few presents. You have to prepare your heart for Jesus. If your heart is full of obstacles, how can you find a way through that wilderness? We all need to clear the way for Christ.

John told the people the best way to prepare for Jesus was to repent, to confess the places in our lives where we had screwed up. The times we were unkind. Unloving. Greedy. Selfish. The times we failed to care for the poor. When we overlooked injustice. The truth is, people like to hear about love at Christmas, but rarely do we enjoy hearing about our need to repent. Isaiah and John the Baptist, however, teach us that repentance is the way that we make room in our hearts to receive Christ as Lord.

The ones who emptied themselves were ready for Jesus. The ones who had no internal obstacles were the first to see the Savior. The shepherds hardly had any possessions. When they heard the announcement from the angels, they immediately got up and searched for Christ. John the Baptist lived a simple life in

the wilderness. He prepared the way for Christ. He plowed the road, paved it, and set up some big orange road signs. "HE is coming!"

Maybe you feel lost, like you are in exile. Will you return home? What voices will you listen to, as the world watches and waits for Christ's return? Will you make room for Christ by removing the things that hold you back? Will you level the mountain of your pride? Will you fill in the valley of your depression? Will you forsake your possessions, lest they possess you? Will you prepare your heart to receive him as Lord? And, will you be the voice that leads others to Christ?

This Christmas, we can proclaim that God made a way. We can shout the good news. I'm going to make a simple challenge to you. "Everyone reach one." I have invitations to our Christmas Eve Candlelight services in two weeks. Each person can find one person to ask and invite to hear the greatest love story the world has ever known. These cards are by the table as you leave. Everyone take one, so that everyone can reach one. God can use you to make a way through the wilderness of someone's heart to find God's comfort and love. And on Christmas Eve itself, we will be receiving an offering for three missionary families we support in this church, people who are quite literally work in the wilderness of other countries to share the good news of Jesus and equip others to do the same.

In the wilderness make a way for the Lord. Together, we can pave the way so that truly all the people will see the glory of the Lord together.

Memory Verse:

Isaiah 40:3 "A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you been lost on a difficult road? What brought you to safety?
2. How did Isaiah prepare the exiles to return to God? How did John the Baptist prepare the people to receive Christ?
3. What obstacles prevent you from making room in your heart to receive Jesus? What can you do this Christmas to remove them?
4. Whom will you invite to worship Jesus this Christmas? Who is your “one” in “Everyone reach one”?