

How to Prepare the Way

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The Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

In the third year of the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, when Grant Sawyer was the governor of Nevada and Roy Bankofier the mayor of Reno, when Jim Carroll was rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, a banker named Stu, son of Paul Webb, had business in Virginia City.

Stu Webb was my dad. The road from Reno to Virginia City has been broadened and made safer in the two generations since my father drove it. And I suppose it is possible these days that some people drive Route 341 from Reno to Virginia City, up the desert mountain and through the Geiger Pass, without their spouses yelling, "Oh, slow down! You're going to kill us all!" while they grip the seat of the car with both hands.

To my mother's credit, the road was narrower then, and there weren't always guardrails between her and a precipitous drop down the mountain—but we were safely tucked in my father's powder blue Buick convertible—and hey—I'm here to tell the story, so how bad could it have been, really?

I will spare you any more details about my dysfunctional family and our behavior in the 1960's except to say this: it was a lot more dusty, and gritty, and windy in the far West than it looks in the movies. The convertible that my father loved made for a pretty grimy ride.

And although my mother was a noisily nervous passenger—that mountainous desert road was very scary, particularly when you were passing another vehicle. But that didn't happen very often—because there just weren't that many people in that part of the country sixty years ago. And even these days, we hear of travelers or hikers getting lost in the Sierra Nevada to tragic result.

The desert mountains in the Middle East—that war-torn land that we call holy—the land where Baruch lyricized about the return of the captives in today's first lesson, and in our Gospel, John called the people to a baptism of repentance—that hilly, dusty land has more in common with the Western part of this country than the gentle Poconos closest to us.

That helps make sense of Baruch's assurance that God will make the way smooth. God will top the mountains and lift up the valleys. No more clinging to the side of the hill, afraid to look over the edge. And of course, Baruch was just repeating the assurance of prophet Isaiah—and John was quoting him outright: *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.*

Many of us here today can sing those words—indeed, later today, right here in this room, we will gather to sing Handel's Messiah, and these words of Isaiah will take wing. And so, all these centuries later, when we have cars to drive through the desert, when we have grading equipment to use and government grants for infrastructure improvement; when the words are a repeated theme in our holy Scripture and even a song on our lips—the stunning image becomes so softened we can miss its grandeur.

For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low

and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. . . .For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory.

Imagine for a minute if you didn't have a way to drive up and down the mountains. Imagine if every trip you took was on foot. Imagine if—not you—but your parents' parents' parents had been carried into slavery and you were being called back to the land of your ancestors. You want to go—you want freedom, and you want to be home—but how are you going to get up that mountain and back down again—you and all your people—and not lose anyone on the way? But the promise is there, *Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.*

And the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. By the way, that line is meant to bring a smile to our faces. Remember how silly it sounded when I set my father in historical context a couple of minutes ago? Well, John the Baptist is pretty famous now, what with being Jesus' cousin and all. And his father Zechariah may not be the best-known guy in the Bible, but we do sing or recite his song every year about this time, as we did between our first and second lessons this morning.

But when Luke was writing this long family story, the back story of the same Jesus who had healed the sick and broken the bonds of death—back then, no one had ever heard of Zechariah—or Elizabeth, his wife, or Mary, her cousin, or Joseph, Mary's intended husband. These were people just as insignificant as a banker named Stu or any of us sitting here today. We are important to each other, of course, and to our families and our friends, but the wider world doesn't know us—doesn't have any reason to know us—we are kind of insignificant in the grand sweep of history.

And the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. The word of the One God, living and true, came to an insignificant nobody named John. John was so insignificant that he didn't even use his own words to draw the people in. Like Baruch before him, and like generations of preachers after him, he quoted Isaiah: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

Isaiah's words are an exhortation—first to those exiles coming home from Babylon—later John uses them to rally the people—to get them ready for the ministry of Jesus. And today—the church uses the words today—proclaims them to us: *Prepare the way of the Lord!*

Advent is a time of preparation. And so, at home and in church we have begun

to deck our halls. I got a text message this week with a photo of my little grandsons wearing pajamas with Santas and reindeer on them. Just a couple of days ago, I watched my favorite *Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer*, while knitting furiously on a Christmas gift. Out in the world, Advent is a time of preparation for the big birthday party on December 25—even old-fashioned Advent calendars are called “Countdown to Christmas Calendars” in these latter days.

I love the feast of Christmas. I love setting up the Nativity scenes and putting out my shoes for St. Nicholas and hanging a sprig of mistletoe so my husband can catch me under it. I love the big, beautiful birthday party that we plan every year for the Baby Jesus. And I love the Baby Jesus—I love that God makes God's self to be vulnerable. That God became a poor little baby helps me to understand that God loves an insignificant little nobody like me.

But we know that Advent is much more than prep time for a birthday party. *Prepare the way of the Lord!* yells John. And he is not talking about new straw for the little statue-baby we will set in the manger. John is talking about what we can do to prepare for God's presence in the world. God's presence right here. Today.

Even though we have cars to drive up the mountains and down into the valleys—and even though we have equipment to make the roads safer in this generation than ever before: we live in a world of mountains and valleys—and not just the physical kind. We live in a world where the desert can be a good metaphor for a wilderness landscape of fear and loneliness.

Prepare the way of the Lord! What can we do to get ready for the presence of God with us? How can we level the impassable mountains and the slippery valleys in the lives of those around us? How can we make the desert less gritty and empty?

Well, look around you. Seriously. Take a minute and look around you. See all the people who are here. And now take a minute and think about every one of the people that each one of us touches. There are our family members, and our friends. And all those people that we meet in our daily work—teachers and students, patients, clients, customers, service workers. The guy who made my sandwich at Wawa last week and the woman who scanned my electronic ticket at Longwood Gardens. And then think about the mail you have received this week—in hard copy or e-copy—and all of the people represented by those end of year appeals: the volunteers at each historic site, the hungry who use food banks, those displaced by war, those suffering from addiction and illness.

I could keep going, but I hope that by now your head is as full of people as Times Square on New Year's Eve. All of the people, and us too—each one of us kind of insignificant in the context of history—and each one very, very important to God.

What can we do to get ready for the presence of God with us? What if we followed the example of St. Paul in today's second lesson? Paul wasn't on a mountain, and I don't think there is a catchy tune for this passage, but what if we hold each of those we have imagined in our hearts? What if, with Paul, we “*thank our God every*

time we remember them, constantly praying with joy in every one of our prayers for all of them,”—that is for all of US, so that “our love may overflow more and more. . . .”

Each one of us has the opportunity this Advent to participate in leveling the mountains and raising the valleys. Each one of us has the opportunity to make life easier and safer and more welcoming to all those whom we hold in our hearts. And then *all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*