

SERMON: Prepare the Way
TEXT: Isaiah 40:1-11

12-6-2020

As I've been pondering once again this familiar passage from Isaiah, I keep getting the image of a child in a sandbox or a person on the beach. No matter what age you are, it's always fun to build things with sand. Several years ago I visited my sister and brother-in-law in Sarasota, Florida. We went to one beach where teams of people were building massive and elaborate sand sculptures for a contest. Of course, they were far enough away from the water so they didn't have to worry about a wave washing away all their hard work.

But that's one of the good things about building in the sand. With one small wave or one swipe of your hand, you can flatten the whole thing. Smooth out the area and start all over again.

I've been trying for days to find a different image to use, as this one is not very Christmas-y. Well, maybe for people living in Florida it is. But it's certainly not a typical scene from holiday cards.

But this year, when I read from Isaiah about lifting the valleys and leveling the mountains, I imagine a mighty arm sweeping across the sand. Wiping away any

evidence of what came before. Making it smooth and preparing it for something new.

We'd like to do that with 2020, wouldn't we? Just take this whole year, with all its closures and cancellations, all its loneliness and illness and death, all its violence and hatred, and just wipe it off the map. Put the 2020 calendar in the paper shredder and pretend it never happened. Perhaps even bury it deep in the sand and then smooth over the top so that no one will ever know. It's been a long year and a very dark time, and we can't wait until it's over.

Isaiah 40 begins what biblical scholars have called Second Isaiah, which covers the time *after* the 150-year exile of the Israelites in Babylon. Chapters 1 through 39 are pre-exile. But the time during the exile is nowhere to be found in Isaiah. It's almost as if someone wanted to pretend that it never happened.

As one theologian explained: "The exile is anticipated in Chapter 39 and then only assumed in Isaiah 40. It's as if the editors didn't need to—or perhaps couldn't bear to—talk about *that* time, when God handed over God's beloved Daughter Zion into the hands of a vicious foreign army." (Michael J. Chan,

www.workingpreacher.org, December 6, 2020)

Imagine. One hundred and fifty years away from your homeland. That's about six generations. You'd think they would have eventually decided to just accept it and try to make the best of a bad situation. Instead, it has been six generations of despair and suffering and trauma, imprisoned in the land of their enemies. *Exile* is their defining characteristic. *Exile* is all they know.

It was also something they brought on themselves. In their failure to obey, God allowed Israel to be conquered and captured by Babylon. And finally, 150 years later, God proclaims that they have suffered enough. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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.*

Comfort, o comfort. Yes, we too, could use a little comfort and tender mercy from God right about now. Though we haven't suffered for 150 years, we are experiencing pandemic fatigue. We're tired of hearing about it. Tired of wearing masks. Tired of being at home. Tired of having to stay away from people. We are tired - and we've had enough - of illness and death.

And though the promise seems to have been made that our suffering will come to an end, the way must be prepared. “A voice cries out, *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*”

I think it was the musical *Godspell* from the early 1970’s where the concept of PREPARE YE THE WAY entered my consciousness in that catchy and repetitive song of the same name. Of course, as a pre-teen, I didn’t give it much consideration beyond the song, though it seemed obvious that the preparations were to be done by those who were looking for answers and waiting for the Lord.

As I matured I began to listen more closely to scripture and sermons. Furthermore, my musical horizons broadened to an awareness of Handel’s *Messiah*. The next verses from Isaiah also came to have meaning for me. *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.*

The magnificence of leveling mountains led me to believe that it must be an act of God. It is God’s mighty arm that sweeps over the sand on the beach. Certainly, our Creator God prepares the way for us, lifting the valleys and lowering the mountains, smoothing the uneven and rough roads of our lives.

More years and greater life experience taught me that, despite Handel's majestic and spritely music behind these words - and a strong faith in God notwithstanding - life is often anything but smooth.

Later, as a new pastor with training in Bible and theology, I thought I had finally figured it out. It was just as I learned it from Godspell. The command to PREPARE THE WAY is for us. We who believe in God are called upon to *make straight in the desert a highway for our God*.

Yet, nearly every year in early December when I study the passage for the umpteenth time, I learn something new. The theologian I quoted earlier wrote: "A new voice joins the scene in verse 3, declaring: *In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God*. While the addressees of this text are likely exiles, or at the very least people who have been affected profoundly by the exile, the highway is not for them, it is for Yhwh. [For God]. The implication of this imagery is that God has abandoned Jerusalem, leaving it to the hands of the Babylonians. Verses 3-5 seek to assure the audience that the time of [God's] long absence from Jerusalem has come to an end. [God] will return to his holy city and again be accessible: *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed....* [This is] very important. The glory of the Lord needs to be revealed

because, from the exiles perspective, it has been hidden, and a hidden God is a terrifying God. [This passage from Isaiah] seeks to convince its audience that the season of God's hiddenness has come to an end." (Michael J. Chan, www.workingpreacher.org, December 6, 2020)

After all this back and forth, I have come to the conclusion that the highway goes both ways. While God is preparing the way to restore our relationship with him, we are expected to do our part in striving to reach God. We need to clear the path of all the obstacles that stand in our way, many of which we have created ourselves. Our priority, as always, needs to be love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

God has PREPARED THE WAY for us by sending Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. May we PREPARE THE WAY for ourselves and others to receive the comfort that he brings... to the glory of God!

AMEN.