

Prepare the Way

Isaiah 40: 1-11 Mark 1: 1-8

Preparations are familiar enough to us these days. Yesterday, for instance, we gathered together to decorate the church. You may have done the decorating drill at home already. I know our tree went up last Sunday. The outdoor lights await me when I get home this afternoon. Doogie has been preparing all kinds of things for our worship services through Christmas Eve. Son Ray, age 28, has been preparing to be a shepherd in the Fort King Presbyterian Christmas pageant. (Sucker.) The pageant is tonight if you want to go and see him in his big role. This is what he does when he isn't getting your taxes raised.

Preparations for many things are often underway or planned for in our future because we want to get it right, we don't want a big mess on our hands, and it may not happen at all if we have failed to prepare. We've learned the hard way that when something gets left to chance, the best chance is that whatever it is will get screwed up. It doesn't take too many lessons of that nature to realize that good preparations are the best way to good outcomes.

It helps to know what is coming exactly. I know that my first round of teaching the Life Mapping course at the prison was a mess. It was my first time out; the curriculum was thin, flat, and not too well organized. I didn't really know what else to do as I fumbled along week after week, following a plan that wandered aimlessly and distractedly rather than integrating varied pieces into something coherent.

Then finally, the pieces started coming together in the last few weeks of that first session. At last I could see how the lessons needed to progress, what the end product would be, how to get there, and securing some added resources to make it an engaging journey. Having started last Monday on a new six month session, I actually feel like I know what I'm doing, where I'm going, having planned for about 20 weeks of lesson. I just feel bad about the guys in that first session; I told them they were my "guinea pigs." It is much easier after you've tried to do something a first time to make confident improvements on the second time around, and to feel more comfortable and successful with the second endeavor.

One of the striking things about both passages of scripture is their location which brings the inquiring believer into the wilderness, into the desert, away from the customary and familiar surroundings of one's town or city neighborhood. Both passages center on personal dislocation.

The preparations in the scriptures detail the herald of God's good news in Isaiah, and the baptizer at the Jordan River named John. Each one involves sacred matters, and those are never easy or simple to comprehend. Placed in the inhospitable and barren wilderness or desert, both scriptures remind us that the journey with God, the spiritual journey, is typically a struggle, a learning struggle. The desert which seems so life less can actually be a vehicle for new life. The desert has the ability to disorient a person and

estrangle them from their typical environment. That's an important aspect of growing into renewal, a separation from the familiar, an examination now possible with new eyes and spirit, and redefinition of one's life.

In Isaiah 40, God addresses the people who had suffered at the hands of Babylon, who had seen their sacred city and sacred precincts destroyed, having been conquered and occupied by the Babylonian Empire. The words are meant to soothe and assure about God's intentions, having been witnesses to his absence and the destructive that came. *Comfort, comfort, my people ... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

It is remembered that the Holy City of God, Jerusalem, was abandoned and left on the dung heap. In her anguish at having been devastated by Babylon, there was never any who would comfort her. She was alienated and scorned among the nations, abandoned by her God. Now God's words to all who would hear are urgent for *Comfort, comfort my people.*

Now God has shown no second thoughts about the brutal judgment brought upon his people. But Zion was sentenced and that sentence has been completed. It is time for something new, for God's people to make a new way toward justice and righteousness as God's kingdom has always expected from them.

They won't be able to accomplish this feat on their own. These people of God have been through the mill. Their return to the Promised Land is sponsored by the new empire on the block, the Persians. That's a huge blessing, but for this people to return to God, to navigate a way to faithfulness and determine a new life, is unreasonable.

A herald goes out among the people, summoning them into the desert, or at least calling them to pay attention to it. There in the rugged, hostile landscape, the road shall be formed, and the place transformed. God's people are told,

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Completely unexpected, the new way takes that old bitter journey – remember the years of desert wandering after the Exodus from Egypt – and makes that desert place where the new way will be shaped, a new way of faith and practice, just as the ancients had learned their faith the hard way.

We can accept the metaphorical nature of the passage as a reference to the inner journey of faith for all of God's people. The landscape of our own spirit and inner life must be re-created to make an acceptable path for the coming glory of the Lord.

Then the voice cries out a second time, “Cry out!” And the prophet in confusion replies, “What shall I cry?” The answer from “the voice” is the reflective,
*All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

The contrast is drawn between the fickle and feeble nature of the faith commitment of God’s people – some things never change – and the eternal and unwavering commitment of God for his people. It may even be a dialog reflecting a protest that God’s people are no different, not deserving of the grace and blessing of their God.

The herald is summoned nevertheless and told to *go up on a high mountain ... [to] bring good news to Jerusalem* and shout it loud and proud, fearlessly and faithfully declaring to the whole countryside, *“Here is your God! See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him.* It’s a very powerful image with the strong arm of the warrior leading the way. Except then it ends in the tender words of nurture. *He tends 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.* Two very different images of this conquering God; strident and forceful against others, but a caregiver to the weak and vulnerable of the flock. [The same kind of dual expression occurs in Deut. 1:30-31.]

God is coming and a new way is coming for God’s people. Whatever you knew and whatever you expected before, God is making a new way. You need to receive this new way, preparing your own hearts and minds and spirits to be made new in faith and purpose.

This is some of what John the Baptizer is doing. Note that this is the beginning of the gospel of Mark, the oldest of the gospels which has no nativity story at all. It starts by quoting Isaiah, the section about the herald in the desert. It goes on to describe the ministry of John the Baptist who was *preaching [about] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

In preparing the people for the coming of the Lord, which John anticipated, he sought to put them in a right relationship with their God. John believed that God is coming to once again to his people, and the people will be judged as God establishes a reign of justice and righteousness. Prepare for his coming and make your own ways straight and true.

John stood outside the religious establishment as his description makes very clear. He is a sight, dressed in camel’s hair clothing and eating locusts and wild honey. He was decidedly not a priest, not a Pharisee, not a Sadducee. He was unique, a prophet of the Lord. By placing himself outside the great city, away from the Temple, and apart from the religious elders, he declares the new thing that God is doing.

John talks about the one who comes after him, the one who is of the Lord, not simply called by the Lord. That one is the one of God, more powerful, leading the way to

the coming Kingdom of God's reign. As John baptizes with water, this one of God will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Our preparations during this season have to move beyond the decorations and merry-making of tradition. Our lessons remind us that this is a spiritual season of renewal, preparing our hearts and minds and spirits for the new way that the promised One will bring. If anything, it stands against any tradition, for it aims to make new.

As was said last week, there is anticipation and expectation in this season, but what it means exactly is always dependent on what we're prepared to receive. God's blessing awaits the faithful who prepare for the Lord's coming, making the way straight and level within, in our spirit and in our lives. May each one be prepared to be led in God's new direction that shows the way to his promise for you.