

If you're about the same age as me, this gospel reading with its quotation from Isaiah immediately brings to mind the beginning of Godspell with its haunting "Prepare the Way of the Lord." Yet I wonder why the Lord needs the way prepared.

Yesterday, members of the altar guild cleaned all our sacred pots and pans in preparation for Christmas. We do this two or three times a year – before the two big festivals of Christmas and Easter, and before the Bishop's visit. I have heard Bishop Mary joke that one of her important functions is to help us all clean our churches! Because when the Bishop comes we want things to be looking good. We want everything to be at its best to honor her and to celebrate her ministry among us.

I think this is what Isaiah was talking about – when the King comes we want everything to be spiffy.

This passage was probably written over 2500 years ago in the 5th century BCE. I wondered what roads were like then so I googled "Roads in 5th century BCE". I was amazed to discover that in the 5th century, King Darius the Great of Persia built a Royal Road which stretched from present day Izmir on the Aegean coast of Turkey all the way to Bagdad. That's over 1300 miles. And it didn't stop in Bagdad but split with part of it going further south and the other northeast along the Silk Road.

So perhaps the writer of Isaiah chapter 40 knew about this road. It didn't go through Palestine, so for his readers it was a marvelous feat in a distant place. Just the kind of thing to be used as an analogy for the spiritual and cultural work that Isaiah was conceiving:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The Royal Road of Isaiah would not be a road for trade and communications, but a road for God so that all flesh – all beings – would see the healing of God. It's a wonderful picture which still inspires us today. We resonate to that call to make space for God.

The gospel reading began with a long list of names which are foreign to our tongues. Luke is placing the vision of the Royal Road firmly in a particular time and a particular place. Humans are creatures of time and place: the spiritual vision of preparing the way of the Lord is not separate from day to day reality. It is always within the geo-political and socio-economic circumstances of our lives that the Road is built.

This morning we are celebrating baptism – the ritual by which we bring new members into the Body of Christ – in a few minutes we'll be baptizing Prubi and Ravi. In the gospel reading, Luke says that John the Baptizer fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the voice in the wilderness when he went into the area around the Jordan and preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John was preparing for the coming of Christ by calling people to change their minds – to make different choices in their lives - to stop living entirely for their own gain and to start living for the common good. The message of the prophets is pretty much the same all through the centuries – love God and live the way God wants – with compassion, forgiveness and integrity. John particularly preached against greed and the corruption that comes from the combination of power and greed.

In this season of Advent, we are encouraged to do the same – to turn from our old ways and live - and in a few minutes we will be reaffirming our baptismal vows with Prubi, Ravi and their parents and godparents. We will once again be promising that we will resist evil, and whenever we sin repent and return to the Lord.

There is much evil in the world. Some of it is intentional, some of it is unintentional and some of it comes from not thinking about the effects of our actions on others or simply not caring. We are all caught up in a system which perpetuates sin and oppression. The sin matrix is real. But in our baptism we have according to the apostle Paul, died to sin.

The baptism which we celebrate is fundamentally different from the baptism of John. He baptized people as a sign that they had repented of their sins and were determined to live a new life – a change which led to the forgiveness of sins because God has promised that whenever we turn to her our sins will be forgiven. Reconciliation is always available. God's love knows no limits. There is never a moment when we are undeserving of God's love. There is a never a moment when we are truly separate from God but every time we turn away it gets a little more difficult to turn back; and every time we turn toward God it gets easier to return the next time.

The baptism that we celebrate is fundamentally different because in it we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is like a little death and a new life in which we are no longer completely, unconsciously, caught up in the matrix of sin which binds human society. Our baptism marks us as Christ's own for ever – we are given the chance, given the choice to step away from the cycle of sin and oppression.

But it isn't magic. We do not walk away from our baptism totally transformed into Christ-like beings. This transformation takes time and intention. Which is why the church celebrates different seasons of the year. We get different reminders, and now in Advent we are reminded to prepare. We are all in our own ways preparing for Christmas but Advent is a deeper preparation. It is claiming the power of our baptism to spruce up our inner lives; to declutter our souls; to clear out the trash to make space for God.

When we are tied up in our own lives, our activities, feelings and fears it can be difficult to find time for someone else. This week my cat was ill and I was texting with Suzan, completely forgetting that she was celebrating her birthday. I was so caught up in my own concerns that I wasn't paying attention to her life. It gets like that with God sometimes. We are so caught up with the preoccupations of our lives that we forget that we are building the Royal Road, we forget to invite God's presence into every area. We forget that in our baptism we have been set apart and marked as God's own for ever.

Yet that is our true reality. Advent gives us a reminder to clean up our acts, polish our internal silver, build the spiritual road, tidy the metaphoric desk... make space for God.