

The Rev. Susan Plucker
Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85

2nd Sunday of Advent
2 Peter 3:8-15a, 18
Mark 1:1-8

Prepare the way, O Zion
Your Christ is coming near.
Let every hill and valley a level way appear.
Greet one who comes in glory, foretold in sacred story.
O, blest is Christ that came in God's most holy name.

Advent hymns dwell in my head this time of year
And I diligently try to not let them
Get pushed aside by Christmas Carols.

I think today's readings are my favorite Advent scriptures.

From Isaiah we hear: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

From Mark: John, in that desert, crying out: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight".

And our collect calling us to
Listen to the prophets, the messengers of God
Calling us to repentance
So we are prepared to greet with joy
The coming of the Christ.

Many years ago, my husband, Frank, and I
Had an encounter with a highway.
Not the 101 kind of highway that we drive on
But an actual wilderness high way.

There is a state campground not far from Lake Tahoe,
On the Nevada side of the mountain range,
Called Grover Hot Springs,
Which is situated by a wonderful hot spring
set up for public bathing and swimming.
(Delicious after a long day of hiking)

Several trails begin along the perimeter of the camp ground,
And one in particular we hiked three times
Trying to reach a little lake
Situated high above the valley.
Each time we had a great hike but failed to reach our goal,
Too many stops to pause, reflect, look around, be present.

The climb is a hard climb—
Steep, rocky, switch back after switch back,
Hot when out of the shade of the trees.

Once hike, we were astonished
To see coming toward us
A young man on a mountain bike
Riding it no less
Down this rocky, steep grade.

What really astonished me
In a much deeper way, each time though
Was the realization that we were hiking
A part of the Fremont/Carson Trail,
A trail used by settlers to move into California.

Its difficult to imagine the hard work, the energy,
The persistence,
The desire of the people
That passed that way.

Rocks still had to be hewn, moved out of the way
To make the trail wide enough for wagons.
They must have had to walk a great portion of it
leading the children and animals.
How slow and tortuous a climb to the top it must have been,
And then down the other steep side.

How often might they have prayed
For the mountains and hills to be made low,
The uneven ground level,
The rough places a plain.

But somehow
The trail scouted out and prepared for them
By Fremont and Carson was enough
Enough for them to keep moving forward.

It really challenges my imagination.

These people had a vision.
They were not just going on an errand
Or a day hike or even a longer back-packing adventure.
They were traveling forward, hopefully,
To find a new way of life;
Traveling on a literal high way
Scouted out and prepared as best as circumstances allowed at that time.

The key reality here,
that particularly corresponds with our readings,
is THE WAY WAS PREPARED FOR THEM.

So often when we hear today's theme
Trumpeted out in music and verse;
"Prepare the way..."

We figure that we're the ones
Being called to build the highway.
That's mistaken thinking.

Today's proclaimers of God's word
Are not telling us
To get out and build the highway to Bethlehem or anywhere else.
That road is already prepared...has been for a long time.

What we're being told to do is to repent...
Acknowledge that we've moved far away from the God-centered life that could be ours,
Then turn around and begin the journey anew
Along the way already prepared for us.

The reading from Isaiah
Is a scene describing God's decree
Of forgiveness and salvation for exiled Israel.

The voices in the first five verses are those
Of heavenly courtiers implementing the decree.

The assembly in heaven is commanded to build the road,
To prepare the way,
So that Israel can return home to Jerusalem
And proclaim to the nations
The power and compassion of their God.

A God whose fullness cannot be comprehended,
A God who comes with power and majesty
But, but, but....is a lowly shepherd
Gently leading the flock home.

In the Gospel of Mark
John the Baptist
Is the messenger of God
And the one preparing the way for the people of Jerusalem.

The people are back in Jerusalem,
in the sacred city now, yes!
But lost again.

Lost from their God,
Now mediated to them through many hollow religious observances.

So what does John do?
He calls them out of the city INTO the wilderness.
He calls them to repent and be baptized.

He's preparing the way, preparing them to meet the one
More powerful than he.

Repent, be baptized and wait.

Wait for the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire,
The one who will bring you into the real presence of God.

Again, the way has been prepared for them.

The choice is theirs...

The choice to repent, to turn around,
Point themselves in the direction of God
Away from their selfish needs or the fears of the world.
And wait, await the one who is coming.

And of course, as always

We have a choice also this 2nd Sunday of Advent.

That choice is not about highway building.

It is not about adding more things to our holiday to-do lists.

It is not about feeding our fears and anxiety regarding the world around us.

It is not about adding guilt to the mix because sometimes
we just feel so useless and bored and sad and confused or even angry.

Our choice is about repentance,

Whether or not to turn back to God

To open our eyes, our ears, our hearts

To what God has already prepared for us...

Whether or not to take the time to catch the prophet's visions

Letting them speak to us

Speak to us of God's power

God's compassion

God's forgiveness

God's love...

Love that took on flesh, became incarnate, present.

Emmanuel...God with us.

I've borrowed a suggestion of how to make that choice

To open our eyes,

Our ears

Our hearts.

The suggestion is called "goat walking",

To be more specific,

"Goat walking to Bethlehem."

Now, a successful goatwalk requires three things from us,

According to my source:

TO DO NOTHING

GO NOWHERE

AND LOSE HOLD

TO DO NOTHING
GO NOWHERE
AND LOSE HOLD

That sounds like an excellent description
Of a goat meandering through a pasture.
But it sure runs counter
To our good old Protestant work ethic
Doesn't it?

Do nothing
Go nowhere
Lose hold

Doing nothing in our Advent context really means
Allowing ourselves to be fully awake to the present,
Considering each moment as God-filled
And allowing ourselves to experience God in our own souls.

Going nowhere
Means letting ourselves sit more than walk or run.
Gather more than sow
Take what God offers
Rather than grabbing for what we can or what we want.

And then lose hold, let go.
Stop trying to take charge
And allow God to take over.

The highway is already prepared for us.

Our work is to repent and prepare
TO CELEBRATE WITH JOY the coming of the Christ.
Goat walk to Bethlehem this Advent.
Do nothing.
Go nowhere.
Lose hold.

The way is prepared and God is beckoning.