

One of the most often quoted Old Testament books during Advent is Isaiah. Over half of the Old Testament references to the coming of the Messiah, to the coming of Jesus Christ, are found in this great book of prophecy. While the first 39 chapters of the book focus on the visions of Isaiah and the coming judgment of Israel for its sins of oppression and injustice, beginning with the 40th chapter, the writer shifts to a message of hope and salvation; in the midst of sin there is forgiveness; in the desert and in the wilderness of life, there is hope.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, let's see what the great prophet Isaiah has to say about the coming of our Lord and Savior as found in the 40th chapter, the first eleven verses. Some of you may recognize this passage from Handel's *Messiah*.

Read Isaiah 40:1-11

This morning I would like for us to concentrate on verses 3 and 4 of this text. These are some of my favorite verses in the Bible. Listen again to these words of Isaiah: "A voice of one calling: in the desert prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, and the rugged places a plain." Now if that's not music to the ears of an old highway engineer, I don't know what is. An environmentalist may not like this, but an old asphalt and concrete engineer like me loves this: knock down the hills, fill in the valleys, pave the earth, make it smooth and level. Boy, that sounds good; I can see the bulldozers and scrapers stirring up dust right now!

The language of these two verses is based on the ancient Near Eastern custom of sending representatives ahead to prepare the way for the visit of a king. In this passage, Isaiah is giving us a picture of preparing a processional highway for the Lord's coming to Jerusalem. In the New Testament, this was the responsibility of John the Baptist, the voice in the wilderness as recorded in the Gospel of Mark that John/Lisa read to us earlier. Today, this is the role of the Holy Spirit.

As we have discussed before, Advent is a season of preparation when we should focus on the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives through the people we meet and the events that we experience. As we prepare for the celebration of His birth at Christmas, our attention should be on preparing, clearing the way for Him to come into our lives either for the first time or in new ways each day. We must never forget that Jesus comes to us each and every day in many different ways.

Now you may be sitting there thinking, Jesus Christ has already come into my life; I have already accepted Him as my Lord and Savior. And that's true for most of us here this morning,

but the questions still remains: as Jesus comes to us each day, and especially during this season of Advent, is the roadway clear of all the obstacles in our lives? Or are preventing Him from having complete control over our lives by erecting barriers? Have we cleared the path for Him or have we set up curves and detours, hoping that we might delay His reconstruction of our lives; preventing Him from transforming us into the person that He wants us to become?

Let's be honest, we all want Jesus as our Lord and Savior, but we want Him on our own terms, not His. You know what I mean; we want our salvation, but we want it without having to make any changes or give up our bad habits or ways of life that may have become the barriers that Isaiah is telling us to remove as we prepare for the King to come into our hearts. We want to remain who we are; in other words, we want to create Jesus in our image and not the other way around.

In the remaining time we have this morning, let's me suggest some ways on how to overcome this reluctance; and out of an old habit, I will be using some engineering terms. So let's see what hills God want us to level and what valleys He wants filled in. When you start thinking about the hills and barriers that we need to overcome to become more like Jesus, one of the first ones that come to mind is pride, our ego. Now this has been a problem of the human race ever since the devil convinced Adam and Eve that he had found a way for them to replace God as "Number 1." We look for ways to be first on everyone's priority list; for ways to be first in line for the parking space at the mall; to have the best of everything, to be Number 1, to be top dog. Some folks are so proud of themselves that they can even strut while sitting down. We live in a "me-first" society where we are more interested in telling others about ourselves and our accomplishments than listening and getting to know them better. And this is definitely no more apparent than at Christmas when we gather with loved ones and friends with each person trying to outdo the other.

Another hill that goes along with pride is our obsession with our possessions. And this is especially true at this time of year with all the TV and internet ads telling us that we cannot be happy unless we buy their product. Department stores and advertisement agencies try to convince us that spending more money and having big expensive toys is the only way to be happy at Christmas. If they had their way, they would change Luke's version of Jesus' birth so that Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem in a Mercedes convertible and stayed at a Hilton Resort, instead of Joseph walking and Mary riding a donkey and Jesus being born in a cave that was used for a stable behind the inn. The shepherds would arrive at the resort in SUV's and the wise men would bring gifts of flat-screen TV's, Star War toys and the latest smartphones. What happened to a bike or ball bat from Santa, one present under the tree and a stocking of fruit hung on the mantle? Materialism has become a major threat to Christmas and living the

Christian life. And who do you think got all this started? The devil, of course, when he sold Adam and Eve and the human race on the concept that more is better.

This Christmas season does our happiness depend on how many gifts we receive and how expensive they are? A wealthy man was moving into a new house; his next door neighbor just happened to be a Quaker. As you know, Quakers believe in simplicity in life. The Quaker neighbor watched as the movers carted in loads after loads of furniture, a great deal of clothing, and many expensive pieces of art. Then he walked over to his new wealthy neighbor and said in his quaint Quaker way: "Neighbor, if thee hath need of anything, please come to me and I will tell thee how to get along without it."

Jesus would have agreed with this advice, for one day He said in Luke 12:15: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things that he possesses." Mother Teresa also said: "If it takes you more than 15 minutes to pack, you have too much stuff." To most Americans that would probably sound ridiculous, but it is a sobering reminder that we tend to accumulate far more than we need. Materialism has nothing to do with amount, as it has everything to do with attitude. Someone said that contentment in life consists not in great wealth, but in simple wants.

And of course, in this season of goodwill to all people, there are the hills of bitterness and grudges. How many of us make mountains out of mole hills, dwelling on past hurts and criticism from loved ones and friends? At a time when we should be focusing on the Christ Child who brought love and hope into the world, do we spend our time rehashing old hurts and missing out on the joy of this time of year? Don't waste another Christmas dwelling on the past; remove those hills from your life; give all your hurts and grudges to the Lord; and then enjoy the season as Jesus intended it to be, a season of hope and love.

Now what about those valleys that Isaiah tells us that we need to fill in before Jesus can come into our hearts and lives? How about the valley of loose tongues, the one that is always gossiping, wanting to talk about others, trying to build ourselves up by bringing others down; always looking for the worst in others instead of the best; always pointing out the mistakes and faults in others in a superior manner. A large earth-moving company had a big scraper known as the model "G." One day somebody asked the owner what the "G" stood for. He thought for a moment and said: "Well, I guess the "G" stands for gossip, because like gossip, this machine moves a lot of dirt and moves it fast." The difference between a gossip and a concerned friend is like the difference between a butcher and a surgeon; both cut, but for difference reasons.

There is no valley so deep as the valley of guilt. It is like Ezekiel's valley of the dead bones, filled with regrets. We often, and this is definitely true at Christmas, let our regrets hold us back from truly enjoying life. Between tomorrow's dreams and yesterday's regret is today's

opportunity. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, said: "When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us." And Will Rogers said: "Don't let yesterday use up too much of today."

A woman woke up during the night to find that her husband was not in bed. So she put on her robe and went downstairs to find her husband in deep thought sitting at the table drinking coffee. She saw him wipe a tear from his eye. So she asked him what was wrong? "Do you remember 20 years ago when we were dating and you were only 16 years old," he asked. "Yes, I do," she replied. "Do you remember when your father caught us kissing in the back seat of my car?" "Yes, I remember." Do you remember when your father shoved that shotgun in my face and said: "Either marry my daughter or spend 20 years in jail?" "Yes, I do." He wiped a tear from his cheek and said: "You know, I would have gotten out today!" Don't let your regrets hold you back.

Then there is the valley of worries; our concern that this will not be the perfect Christmas; that someone will not like their gift; that everybody will not get along; that Christmas dinner will not be perfect. Worry has been defined as "a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained." Worry is like a rocking chair; it will give you something to do, but it will not get you anywhere. A child does not worry all day long as to whether his house will be there when he gets home from school or whether her parents will have a meal for her that evening. Children do not worry about such things, because they trust that their parents will provide for them. In the same way, we as Christians should trust that our heavenly Father will provide what is best for us.

Philippians 4:6 tells us: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Unfortunately, it is human nature to worry. But in this verse, the Apostle Paul gives us the way to let go of worry, by praying. Prayer shifts our focus from ourselves and our concerns to God. Prayer acknowledges what we cannot control and assures us that we are held in God's hands. When we pray, we take the load of worry that weighs us down and hand it over to God. Maybe nothing in our situation or circumstance will change, but everything within us will be different. The place once filled with worry now becomes a space of joy.

And finally, one of the biggest obstacles and deepest valleys to experiencing Jesus in our lives is our reluctance to repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness from the Lord. On Christmas, Jesus came to free us from the burden of sin and to clear the way for us to know Him and His Father better. Someone once said that "man is born with his back to God, and that repentance is turning square around." Genuine repentance comes when we see ourselves as God sees us. A soldier has defined repentance in three commands: "Halt, about face, and forward march." In

other words, get in step with God. We cannot by our own power get the haunting and nagging feeling of sin out of our minds and lives, but we can through the forgiveness and grace that Jesus offers us this Christmas.

This morning, Isaiah is telling us to clear the road; let nothing stand between you and your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Each September in northern Manitoba, Canada, the temperature drops and rain freezes. This causes ruts in the dirt roads. A sign by one road read: "Choose your rut carefully. You'll be in it for the next 60 miles." Don't get in a rut this Christmas; remove whatever is separating you from truly experiencing the presence of Jesus in your life this year, and experience the joy of Christmas as never before. Merry Christmas.