

“ . . . traveling together . . . “

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

Advent #2

December 6, 2020

Recently I was back in Ontario and I did my usual morning walk/jog. One morning I was a little more adventurous and I decided to walk down the mountain steps; and as my kids would say, easy peasy. But when I got to the bottom, I had to turn around and go back up – more than 289 steps; now that was difficult and when I got to the top, I rested. That’s what I was doing in October, visiting my mom in hospital and my son as he recovers at home.

What have you all been up to recently (pause) in the past week? I know one couple celebrated an anniversary on the 3rd of December, while another couple celebrated an anniversary and the groom’s birthday just 2 days ago. For these two couples, it has been a busy week. What have you been up to this past week? You know it’s only 18 days till the we have an evening carol and readings service – make sure you have your candles ready to light as we sing “Silent Night”. PAUSE

Now if you have been reading the lectionary readings for this week, you will have read:

“... 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, the rugged places a plain”

But in 2020, do we connect with these words. When I think of highways being made straight, valleys raised, and mountains lowered; I think of what the province did in 2010 for the Olympics on the Sea to Sky Highway and what the province is doing to the difficult terrain of highway 4 around the eastern edge of Kennedy Lake.

Remember those images; me climbing the steps up the mountain, what the Sea to Sky Highway and #4 used to look like and begin to consider what was read from Isaiah:

“... 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, the rugged places a plain”

What kind of highways did Isaiah have in mind when he used that word? There were roads in Isaiah’s day, but they were not like our roads. Travel was accomplished on foot or with a donkey – rarely by horse or camel and never in a car. Carrying anything was hard and sometimes very dangerous, the threat of robbers along the 88 km walk from Jerusalem to the Jordan River was ever present!

And then in Mark’s gospel we hear of a man named John baptizing people from Jerusalem in the Jordan River, who have walked those same highways that Isaiah spoke about.

We do not hear angels whispering in Mary’s ear. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, no wise men from the East following a star, no big-eyed animals standing around a straw-stuffed manger. For whatever his reason, Mark has not written about any of them. Mark writes about what he thinks is important; that the good news of Jesus Christ begins in the wilderness of Judea with John the Baptist, the first real prophet to turn up in around ten (10) generations.

This prophet, trying to “... make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” is dressed in camel’s hair cinched with a leather belt; the exact same outfit Elijah wore 800 years before him. His hair and his beard look as if they have never been cut and he is skin and bones. This man was a messenger - predicted by Isaiah, dressed like Elijah, sent by God - a prophet in the classic mold.

I cannot figure out why so many people flocked to see the prophet called John. Everything I know about him makes me think I would have gone out of my way not to get near him. He sounds too much like those street evangelists who wave their Bibles and tell you that

you are going straight to hell if you do not repent right now (and of course, they are the only ones who know how you are supposed to do that and whether or not you have succeeded).

But there is one major difference between them and John. Self-appointed prophets tend to plant themselves right in your way so that you have to cross to the other side of the street to avoid them. They get in your face and dare you to ignore them. John was different; he planted himself in the middle of nowhere. He set up shop in the wilderness, and anyone who wanted to hear what he had to say, had to go to a lot of trouble to get there. They had to travel that highway I spoke of earlier; they either borrowed the neighbor's donkey or set off on foot with enough food and water for the journey, which led them through those lonely highways that were thick with bandits.

Why would a Jew leave Jerusalem, and tempt fate? The temple was in Jerusalem, so were the rabbis and the religious establishment. If you wanted to hear from God, you could always attend some extra services or make an appointment with one of the chief priests! Who would leave 'civilization' and travel the 'highway' to meet someone named John?

John must have had something that people wanted to hear, because his appearance did not scare them away. The words that he shared with those who gathered around him, must have sounded as if he was repeating what God was whispering in his ear, one sentence at a time. He did not have all the details. He did not know the name of who was coming, or what he looked like, but he did know that the old world was about to end and that God's chosen one was coming here to change it.

This new world would not be built with material from the old; it would be built with new materials. The temple taxes and the insincere attitude of the religious leaders had all but snuffed out the Spirit in Jerusalem. And so, John was called out of the big city, into the wilderness by God, where the air was sharp and clean, away from all the man-made rules.

Outside of Jerusalem, away from civilization, the citizens would meet the most socially unacceptable character anyone could imagine. The camel hair clad, locust and honey breathing John, proclaimed that someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hang around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready, to prepare the way, so that when he came, he could walk right to their doors.

That good news, it started with John. He was the messenger, and the message lit him up like a bonfire in the wilderness. People were drawn to him like moths to a candle; not just because of who he was and what he said, but because of what he offered them - a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else and start over again, by allowing him to wash them off.

The washing was his own idea. There were not any rules about how it was supposed to be done. The rabbis had not okayed it. It was just something John offered to all those who came to him - even women and well-known sinners. They would never have dreamed of trying to get inside the temple in Jerusalem. John's baptism bypassed the temple and all its rites. Setting up shop in the wilderness, he proclaimed his freedom from so-called civilization, with all its rules and requirements. He called people to wake up, to turn around, so that they would not miss the new things that God was doing right before their eyes.

The gospel always begins with a messenger, whether it is an angel whispering in Mary's ear, or a parent telling a child a story, or a skinny prophet standing knee-deep in a river. What strikes me about this messenger - this John the Baptist - is that he was nowhere near a church, and those who insisted on staying inside the church never heard his message. Only those who were willing to enter the wilderness got to taste his freedom, and many of them were still there when the spectacular someone arrived, far from the civilized center of town.

I reckon every one of us has some idea where our own wilderness lies, as well as a long list of all the good reasons why we should not go there. We are comfortable where we are,

after all. We know the ropes and we know we will be fed. Why should we hunt for God anywhere else? I cannot imagine, unless it is that voice crying out in the wilderness, the one you cannot quite make out from here. If we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of what God is saying. The good news is always beginning somewhere in the world, for those with ears to hear and hearts to go wherever the way may lead.

Properly, Advent is a time for struggle. To be ready for God's gift requires that we spend time with our own need. So, Advent is a time of preparation and struggle and pain. As Jesus spent time in his own wilderness, we are called to make a journey throughout our lives that makes us know we need the one who is coming and ever-coming. It is a time for struggle, but it is not less a time for hope. It is a time to be comforted by a prophet who assures us that as hard as it all maybe, it will not be impossible. There is a way, and the one who even now is waiting to welcome us has prepared a way for us. Amen.