

Sunday, December 7th 2014

Readings

Isaiah 40

1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. **2** Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. **3** A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD ; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. **4** Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. **5** And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." **6** A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all human faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. **7** The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. **8** The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." **9** You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" **10** See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. **11** He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Psalm 80

1 You, LORD, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob. **2** You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. **3** You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger. **4** Restore us again, God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us. **5** Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations? **6** Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? **7** Show us your unfailing love, LORD, and grant us your salvation. **8** I will listen to what God the LORD says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants-- but let them not turn to folly. **9** Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. **10** Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. **11** Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. **12** The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. **13** Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

2 Peter 3

8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. **9** The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. **10** But the

day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. **11** Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives **12** as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. **13** But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. **14** So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. **15** Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation.

Mark 1

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, **2** as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"-- **3** "a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' " **4** And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. **6** John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. **8** I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

Advent is a progressional season. Each week we make progress. Each week we get a bit closer to Bethlehem, a bit closer to the Christmas miracle of God becoming a human. That's why we lit one candle last week and light a second on our wreath this week. That's why last week we only had wreaths, but this week we have a tree and some more greenery. We're not to Christmas yet. But we're getting closer.

The readings and themes of the season progress as well. On the first Sunday of Advent, we spoke of

prophecy, and particularly the prophecy of Isaiah, that the Lord would bridge the divide between heaven and earth, would collapse divinity and humanity. That prophecy we see fulfilled in Jesus, an image of communion for all creation.

The second Sunday of Advent takes another step, from prophecy to **preparation**. Again from Isaiah's lips we hear a prophecy of one who paves the way for the coming Christ, and in today's Gospel reading we hear of John the Baptist fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy and preparing the way of the Lord, making straight the paths of the Messiah. Each is concerned with us preparing the way of the Lord. Prophecy is a revelation of truth, of God's will, of the coming kingdom. Prophecy tells of a reality that is coming,

one that requires change, that necessitates transformation. That transformation is our preparation.

Preparation is a fairly common theme in our culture today. In fact, there's an entire television series dedicated to it: Doomsday Preppers. This show details the lives of survivalists, commonly called "preppers," whose goal is to prepare for life after the end of civilization as we know it. The show centers around their preparations for an economic collapse or a destruction of our electrical grid or a myriad of other catastrophes. Now, these people don't just buy up beans and bullets and bottled water, though that often is a short-term solution. They've buried turned missile silos into longterm survival shelters powered by generators, developed biospheres to survive massive

climate change or nuclear winter, and learned to rely on the land rather than supermarkets for daily sustenance. These people are prepared for the future that they see coming.

Now, let me be clear. I'm not saying we need to become survivalists as an Advent discipline. Rather, the example of preppers reveals to us that *action* is a necessary part of preparation. While the hope inspired by prophecy is a good feeling, an inspirational sensation, that hope must inspire action to truly prepare for the new reality that is coming. For Advent, that new reality is Jesus becoming human, God becoming one of us, the unification of heaven and earth. We can hope for that, we must hope for

that, but that hope must also lead to an active preparation for Christ Jesus.

What does this active preparation look like? The Gospel and Isaiah tells us that preparation is to “prepare the way of the Lord, and make the paths straight.” Make the paths straight, huh? Well, this is the dude who rose from the dead, so I’m guessing he doesn’t need us to make an asphalt expressway to make it here. But the imagery of a level, direct road is a helpful one for our own preparation.

Now, y’all now all about preparation. For most of the last five years you’ve been in preparation for the future God had in store. During those same five years, starting in the fall of 2009, I’ve been in the ordination

process, in divinity school and then seminary. These last five years have been preparation for us all.

And if we're honest about this time, for us all, the road was anything but straight and the landscape was anything but flat. At times, we got caught in our own doubts and fears. At times, that the future seemed uncertain, not only in the details, but even the very potential to have a future seemed unlikely. The road was as curvy as an Appalachian highway, with as many blind spots as a riverside byway.

But at other times in the journey, things seemed to clarify. Here you gathered toward taking the risk to call a new pastor and taking the risk to invest in renovating this space all for the common missions of reaching out to the community in new ways. All of

the sudden, the paths that once seemed impassable straightened out because, together, you actively prepared for the future together. Working together toward the kingdom, that is how we make straight paths for Christ.

Here, then, we see that within the call to preparation there is surely good news. Come from conflict into a place where there is preparation for new ministry is good news. We've from a place where we weren't sure Christ Lutheran Church would still be around to a place of brand new life – not just new space or new staff or new ministries, but a new chance for life together here in the New River Valley. The call to preparation, the call to action, is a Gospel laden call.

Isaiah's exhortation begins with these words:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.” Preparation in the Advent season begins with a reminder: That God has first done something for us, and in light of that action, in light of God's preparation, we too may act, we too may prepare for the newness of life that comes in Bethlehem's manger. Comfort to the people who are paralyzed by their fear, for you need no longer fear! Prepare for the living God. Comfort to the people who are desperate because of their poverty, for you will be filled with wondrous things! Prepare for the living God. Comfort to the people who are anxious

because of their failures, for the Lord's forgiveness takes no account of your faults. Prepare for the living God. Comfort to people who suffer violence because of their skin color, for a time is coming when there equality is more than just Dr. King's dream, but the Risen King's reality. Prepare for the Living God.

The call to an active preparation is a divine call to restore the integrity and the identity of God's people. Prophecy tells us what newness God has in store, and preparation reminds us that we are God's people, God's creative partners in the world. We are called to prepare the way of the Lord, to make the paths straight for the Messiah, because we carry the image of God within us. As the work of God's hands,

filled with the breath of the Holy Spirit, we help to prepare the world for the coming of Christ.

Our preparation has a cosmic scope. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, we prepare not only for ourselves, but for all creation. We prepare not only to come face to face with Jesus, but to reintroduce creation to her Creator. As Christ's emissaries, as Christ's envoys, as Christ's stewards, our preparation is a witness to all creation about what kind of event is coming! So, are we just buying presents and decking halls? Or are we preparing for the king who said, "give to those who ask," preparing for the Lord who embraced the outcasts, preparing the God who ate with criminals and created community across racial

lines? Are we preparing for the One who embodied justice and mercy in every word and deed?

At CLC now, we are in the process of preparation. We now prepare our sanctuary not only for ourselves, but for our entire community. In fact, a representative from the Radford MLK Jr. celebration stopped by this week, took one look at this space, and asked if we could possibly host a food packaging event to help feed the poor across the NRV. With this flexible space, we can come together with the entire community and prepare the way of the Lord, to find ways for the entire NRV to taste and see that the Lord is good.

We now prepare for new ministries, to families with members on the autism spectrum and to

students in our local schools. With times of worship and fellowship, we can affirm the integrity of all people and all abilities in this place. With times of study and mentorship, we can encourage growth into the good gifts that God placed within us. And in each case, we prepare the way of the Lord, to find ways for those who feel ostracized by society to find a home in this very sanctuary.

Active preparation for God is helping to foster the growth of God's Kingdom here on earth. As we wait for Jesus, we wait actively, anticipating His coming with lives that reflect God's image. To prepare for God's Kingdom, we live as though the Kingdom is here. Here in a manger. Here in a child. Here, Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

