**Whose Path Are You On?**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Isaiah 40:1-11 – December 10, 2023

Comfort, O comfort my people,  
   says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
   and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
   that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord’s hand  
   double for all her sins.  
A voice cries out:  
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
   make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
   and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
   and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
   and all people shall see it together,  
   for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’  
A voice says, ‘Cry out!’  
   And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’  
All people are grass,  
   their constancy is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
   when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
   surely the people are grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
   but the word of our God will stand for ever.  
Get you up to a high mountain,  
   O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
   O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
   lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
   ‘Here is your God!’  
See, the Lord God comes with might,  
   and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
   and his recompense before him.  
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
   he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
   and gently lead the mother sheep.

The deep anticipation and hunger for God awakened in Advent heightens the sense of distance. Advent brings me up short, reminds me that our capacity to save ourselves is pretty limited. We know that, of course. We believe salvation is from God. But in so many ways we live as if it’s in our hands. If we could just get it right, Christ will be revealed among us anew.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote a letter before Christmas 1943. "Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits and hopes and putters around but in the end what we do is of little consequence. The door is shut, and it can only be opened from the outside." We are here, doing the best we can, awaiting, anticipating the coming of God, the presence of God in our lives.

The prophet Isaiah announces a stunning word of hope to the people of Israel who were captive in Babylon at the time: “Comfort. Comfort ye, my people,” saith our God. Now, this was the first word spoken by God to the people after a silence of 150 years, announcing that the time of captivity and exile was over, that the time of homecoming had begun. Gathering the people from exile and calling the people home to God is the defining narrative of Holy Scripture and of our faith.

I long assumed that the instruction to prepare a highway, to clear the path for the coming of God… first announced by Isaiah, then echoed by John the Baptist… I’d assumed that instruction was directed to us, to the people. On more careful examination, however, the passage from Isaiah appears to report the activities of a council of government, cabinet members to the Holy of holies. The opening proclamation comes from God alone: “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God. Then, “Speak tenderly.” Says one: “Cry out!” And another replies, “What shall I cry?” Still another voice: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The command to prepare is issued, then, not necessarily to the people of God or to us; it is to others of God’s court: “You, go to the mountains; you, to the sea, and you to the valleys.” A chorus of heavenly beings, deployed, sent out to prepare the way.

Why does this interpretation matter? Because it means the coming of God does not depend on your action or mine. Do your good deeds, say your prayers, love your neighbors, seek justice, raze those mountains, level the rough places. It is only a matter of time before you too will realize that, like being in prison, the door can only be opened from the other side. Ultimately, it is God who prepares and paves the way to us; by grace, God comes to us.

Offering an alternate view, Tara Isabella Burton is a novelist with a doctorate in theology. In her recent book, Self-Made: Creating our Identities from DaVinci to the Kardashians, Burton proposes that our understanding of our own sense of self, our personal identity, has changed over the course of centuries.

These days, there is a widespread perception that fulness of life comes through self-actualization. Unique among our fellow creatures because of free-will, our purpose and destiny is to exercise that will, to choose, to grow into the fullness of who God created each of us to be.

I may be behind on current lingo, but recently learned of the contemporary usage of the word “manifesting” – the act of bringing a tangible desire or goal into reality, often by putting intentional energy into bringing these goals to life. With enough practice, you can manifest anything: money, a dream job, and even a person. Even if *you’re* not working on it, Burton reports, over 50% of Americans say they’d be a professional influencer if they could. Cultivating and capitalizing on a personal brand is nothing new.

In a not dissimilar way, a great many of us understand the spiritual path as one of personal awakening, personal practice; that it is for each of us to discern and to live into our calling as fully as we are able. Some draw upon the practices of a single tradition, others mix and match. This is not new. But it has not always been this way.

She traces the history of the self-made man (yes, “man”), the entrepreneur, the dandy who lives life as art, up to the present, citing exemplars along the way from Leonardo DaVinci to Frederick Douglas to Kim Kardashian. Before the 1500’s, and in some cultures today, one’s identity begins and ends in relationship, community. Whose path are you on?

Poet and pastor Jan Richardson writes,

“Advent is a season that calls me to remember that even as I move across what seems like uncharted territory, there is a way that lies beneath the way that I am going.

“In some sense we are all creating the road as we go. Yet beneath this, undergirding this, is a path carved by those who have traveled here before us, who followed the God who called them to the journey, who gave themselves to preparing a way for the One who came into the world to walk with us.”

An extraordinary, exhilarating thing happened at St. Columba’s yesterday: Mitchell Felton was ordained a priest in the church of Christ. For those who bore witness, there was no doubt about the power of the Spirit moving all through the generations and the millennia to Mitchell, that he might then provide a way for the generations to come. Priest of the Way, in a great cloud of witnesses. As with Mitchell, so with us. Awakening to God’s call within; following the path of God’s messengers before us.

**I end with a poem by Jan Richardson: “Blessing the Way” ~**

With every step  
you take,  
this blessing rises up  
to meet you.

It has been waiting  
long ages for you.

Look close  
and you can see  
the layers of it,

how it has been fashioned  
by those who walked  
this road before you,

how it has been created  
of nothing but  
their determination  
and their dreaming,

how it has taken  
its form  
from an ancient hope  
that drew them forward  
and made a way for them  
when no way could be  
seen.

Look closer  
and you will see  
this blessing  
is not finished,

that you are part  
of the path  
it is preparing,

that you are how  
this blessing means  
to be a voice  
within the wilderness

and a welcome  
for the way.

Comfort, O comfort my people. God is blessing you, that you might be a blessing for others. Allow your steps to lead you:

this blessing  
is not finished,

you are part  
of the path  
it is preparing,

you are how  
this blessing means  
to be a voice  
within the wilderness

and a welcome  
for the way.

Amen.