

The Road to Bethlehem: How Do We Get There?

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Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Second Sunday of Advent

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

Last Sunday we began our Advent journey to Bethlehem by getting in touch with our deepest longings - longings that go far beyond the acquisition of things, longings, for instance, for peace, and time, and justice, and hope. Julian of Norwich would say that we have within us a love-longing, a longing for connection to God and to each other. In the sermon I quoted from Augustine who prayed, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee." As we head towards Bethlehem in this season, *this* longing is what drives us.

The passage from the Hebrew Scriptures assigned for today is from the 40th chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah. This portion of Isaiah's book is written to a people in exile, an exile they understand to be a consequence of their unfaithfulness to God's covenant. They have been carried away from Jerusalem and into captivity in Babylon. They are far from the home they love. The Temple, the place where they have focused their religious impulse, has been destroyed, and it is, at any rate, far from them way back in the land of Judah. This is the context in which Isaiah speaks to the people.

The passage begins with what seems to be a glimpse into a conversation between God and other heavenly beings, in which God calls on them to offer words of solace and encouragement. Pay particular attention to the voice that cries out - and what it says. When that voice speaks of making a highway in the desert a highway for our God, know that this probably references the practice of the Babylonians, who would start at what was known as the Ishtar gate and have processions in which they carried statues of their gods and goddesses, Marduk and Ishtar among others. As you listen, revel in the beauty of the poetry. Note how the road the voice envisions is in the wilderness.

*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.*

Our New Testament passage is from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, does not tell stories about Jesus' infancy. He instead begins his gospel by evoking the passage we just read from Isaiah about preparing a road for a divine processional, then moves into telling the story of how people went out to see John the Baptist, who was proclaiming a baptism of repentance, in the Judean countryside. This is more than 500 years after the end of the Babylonian exile, but in Mark's day, before the advent of modern technology, the words of the prophets weren't "written on the subway walls." They were told and retold in the community of faith. So Isaiah's poetry would have been ingrained in the hearts and souls of the Jewish hearers of Mark's Gospel. Listen now for God's Word:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight",*

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of

Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

"Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." If there is a better passage to begin a sermon on the journey to Bethlehem, I don't know what it is. Of course, to speak of a journey to Bethlehem is not so much to speak of a literal trip to a physical place. (Although I should add that some of us here have been to that particular spot on our globe, just nine miles outside of Jerusalem. Henry and Jean Haigler were just there a few short weeks ago; you can ask them about the literal Bethlehem).

But for our purposes, to speak of a journey to Bethlehem is to speak of a metaphorical adventure to that space, that reality in our hearts and lives, where the love of God - fleshed out in human beings as it was fleshed out in Jesus - becomes real for us, where it takes on significance. If the poets are right and we all have our own Bethlehem's, if our hearts contain within them a place where Christ's embodied love is born, or where it can land and take root, then we do well to focus on how we get to that place, the state of being where we experience that reality.

I love that language of preparing a highway in the desert a highway for God. I can see how it might have worked for exiles who watched their captor's parade statues of Marduk and Ishtar down the city streets of Babylon. I can see them thinking, as the divine festival processions passed by and throngs of Babylonians lined the parade route, "We're going to have not just a processional avenue, but our own highway, and it is going to go through the desert all the way back to Jerusalem, and God is going to come on that highway and lead us on it like a shepherd carrying lambs in his arms." That's an image that would have had some currency for the people of that day.

But to take it literally would be to miss the point. The highway for God, in 550 BC, or the year 30 AD, or now, is not paved with macadam, cement, or asphalt, it is constructed with openness and receptivity towards where God's divine presence might be leading us and addressing us. The path is there, it is always there, we just have to have eyes to see it and ears to hear it.

So how do we get to where God wants us to go? How do we sense God's presence? We first have to cultivate receptivity - a willingness to let the events of life, the words of scripture, and the stirrings of the spirit, speak to us.

These days, when we talk about roads and highways, the widespread use of global positioning technology naturally leads us to think about GPS systems. I remember when Judith and I first arrived here a little more than six and a half years ago. I had no GPS, just those big bulky maps with the white and black covers in the spiral binders. I think they were called ADC maps. I'd carry those maps around with me. I would drive somewhere, and maybe before I left I would print out a MapQuest or something, and that was fine (if I put in the right address, of course).

Sometimes I left the church or the house without a MapQuest. Or if I had one with me, I'd accidentally make a wrong turn or miss a turn altogether, and all of the sudden I was off the grid. I was off the sheet. And then I was in trouble. That's usually when I called Craig Saunders. If I was in D.C., I'd try to hide the cell phone, so I wouldn't get a ticket for using a cell while driving. More often than not when I got off the map, I was in the District. And I'd call Craig, and he would say, "Where

are you? What do you see?" "Well, I see the Washington Monument, it is way over there." "Okay, what else do you see? What other landmarks? What street are you on? What street are you crossing?" And he would figure out where I was and help to guide me to where I needed to go. Listening to his directions would help to get me there. I think in some ways, Craig was a lot like the Holy Spirit in that respect.

Eventually, I acquired a GPS of my own. And that has come in handy. But early on, after there was a rash of car break-ins in our town house complex, I decided I'd better carry the GPS inside at night. So I'd bring it in and I would tuck it in my sock drawer. One morning I forgot to take it out to the car with me, and that was precisely the day when luck would have it I was going into DC and I got all confused, and I eventually just punted on trying to get where I was going - and I couldn't reach Craig on the phone. I finally found my way back to the church. Later that evening I called my mom and related the story of how I'd gotten lost and that I'd left my GPS in my sock drawer. She made me laugh with her response, "Well, I'll bet you haven't lost a sock in a while!" If you have a GPS and you don't use it, it is your own fault if you get lost.

But even having a GPS is not all that helpful if you don't have a pretty good idea of where you want to end up. If you don't have a destination in mind to plug into the system, it's not going to be all that helpful to you. And if you plug in the wrong destination, it may lead you there, but you'll find out that it may not be where you wanted to go in the first place. I think most of us have had experiences like that, too.

This summer, we were coming back from upstate New York, and we were going to drop our daughter Martha off at the Trinity Presbyterian mission trip worksite in West Virginia. They were staying at a place called the Gore Early Learning Center in Clarksburg, WV. Judith had left the directions back at home, but we thought, "No problem. We know the title of the place. It's the Gore (or maybe it was the Core?) Early Learning Center, somewhere near Clarksburg. We'll just plug that in. It came up with a Core Center, but not in Clarksburg, although it seemed near Clarksburg.

So we're driving along, and we get to the place where I think we need to head south to get to Clarksburg, but the GPS sends us north. We are actually driving away from Clarksburg! We drive further and further, and we are way out in the middle of nowhere, and we come upon the Core Center. And it is deserted. That's when Judith finally decides that she is going to try to reach the Trinity group on her cell phone. She calls them and gets through and they say, "We are in fact at the Gore Early Learning Center here in Clarksburg. It is not far from downtown. Where are you?" She tells them, "We are at the Core Center out in the middle of nowhere, not really all that close to Clarksburg." So they give Judith not just the name, but the full address of the Gore Center, she plugs the address into the GPS, and off we go. Forty-five minutes later we arrived where we were supposed to be heading in the first place, not without a little bit of frustration expressed by the driver (me), I must add.

So, those were some funny stories. But what does all of this talk of GPSs and roads and highways have to do with our life with God and our journey to Bethlehem? Well, first of all, if you want to get to the place where love is embodied more and more in your life on a more and more consistent basis, you need to be clear about that being your destination. That's a different destination; by the way, than rising to the top of your profession, avoiding ever facing any real pain, having more stuff than anybody else, or making sure you are popular or get into the best college. Those are not necessarily bad destinations either, to be sure, but if that's all you put into your internal GPS, the road of your life may lead you to business success. It may lead you to avoid as

much pain as possible. It may lead you to academic achievement, but you may find out when you get there that you have not accomplished nearly enough of the real work of life, which is to love, love even those who are difficult to love. You may find that you have not done as much to embody love as you might have.

I ran across a really interesting article on the internet this week from a hospice worker, who related the top six regrets people had in life as they neared death. She's worked with hundreds and hundreds of dying people, and these are what she said were the biggest regrets they expressed. One, I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not to what others expected me to be. Two, I wish I hadn't worked so hard - I sacrificed too much time with my family. Three, I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. Four, I wish I'd stayed connected to my friends. Five, I wish I'd let myself be happier. (That is their recognition that our attitude toward life is a choice we make). Six, I wish I'd taken better care of my health while I still had it.¹

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching repentance, he was calling people to get the settings on their internal GPSs correct. To repent was to turn toward God and away from that which led you away from God. It was to orient your life in the direction of God, to be receptive to God's leadership.

One of the old original Disciple Bible Study video tapes features a speaker who talks about the Biblical idea of repentance. As I remember it, he says something along these lines. "Repentance is like this. "If you are starting out in Oklahoma City, and you want to get to Baltimore, Maryland, you do not drive in the direction of Los Angeles. You turn around and head east. You head in the direction of where you want to go."

The Friday morning of our 50th anniversary celebration, my back seized up, and I could not get comfortable. A lot of you know what that kind of back pain is like. Later that morning, I posted something about it on Facebook, and a member of our congregation who is a personal trainer saw it, and she offered to work on my back for me. I went to see her the next morning, Saturday, and she stretched me, and iced me, and loosened me up enough so that I could at least move, albeit gingerly, through the rest of the weekend. Then she encouraged me to begin to take my health a little more seriously, to think about what I was eating and to pay attention to whether or not I was getting enough exercise.

Since the Anniversary weekend, I have been doing just that - taking eating, exercise, and my overall health more seriously. I get up three mornings a week at 5:15 to go to Spinning Class. Now if you'd asked me back in September, "Aaron, will you ever get up at 5:15 in the morning to exercise?" I would have said, "Well, no, probably not." If you had asked me, "Aaron, will you ever get on a stationary bike, with a group of other people, and listen to dance music and ride it for fifty-five minutes?" I would have laughed at you.

Well, I'm doing that now - and doing strength training as well, and paying attention to what I eat - and I can feel the difference. It is a matter, I think, of repentance. Of realizing where I want to be - of realizing that my body is a gift from God and that I only get one body - and turning back in the direction of taking care of it.

Now I don't know where you may need to repent this Advent. I don't know what you may need to turn away from in order to turn back toward God's best intention for your life. But I encourage you to think about that.

One of the places my internal GPS has led me is to Immanuel. Here is a place and a people where I am encouraged in the work of love. Here is a place where I read and listen to stories and let those stories shape me into someone who is better than I would be if I weren't paying attention to scripture. Here is a place where I experience community with people who hold me accountable.

I don't know where your internal GPS is leading you all the time. But I know it led you to Immanuel this morning. And for that I am glad.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ You can find the whole article at the Addicted@Success website. Here is the link: <http://addicted2success.com/success-advice/the-top-5-regrets-in-life-by-those-about-to-die/>