

## “Prepare the Way of the Lord”

Isaiah 40:1-11

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To prepare the way of the Lord is to make peace with the people or the situations with which we are not at peace. If one imagines the Lord coming for a home visit, one might make a list of the chores that need to be done prior to the arrival, or the groceries that need to be purchased, or the areas of the house that need to be dusted.

Isaiah the Prophet lets us know we are off the hook on all those details. He lets us know that the way to prepare for the Lord's coming into our lives is to become active peacemakers, especially with those from whom we have become estranged. He says, **“Let the uneven ground be made level.”** Modern translation: ‘tend to the bumps in the road of our relationships; make peace with those we may have injured or bullied or disrespected.’ To prepare the way of the Lord is to mend the fences that need to be mended.

The prophet reminds the community that life is short, our lifespan no longer than the green of a grassy meadow. Thus, there is an urgency to this matter of reconciling with one's neighbor, to tending to the bumps in the road.

I've been looking into having our house painted next spring. All the painters who have looked at the house have pointed out some critical work that needs to be done before the painting can begin. They are glad to do the painting, but I need to do some sanding and trimming and power washing and such.

Isaiah sees that his community needs a paint job! The community has been nicked and scraped and battered. God, the Comforter, is coming to bless them with a new day, but there are a few things they need to do in order to experience the force of that comfort.

So, in addition to lighting an Advent candle of peace, I am making a list of the relationships and the situations in my life that have a few bumps. Unless I tend to this work of peacemaking, the comfort of God is delayed. The dawn of the new day is placed on hold.

The prophet's call is for the citizens of his nation to own responsibility for doing this work of peacemaking. Isaiah's call reverberates throughout the generations and among all the nations. "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

The violent incidents in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City, and now Cleveland, Ohio cause me to reflect on any vestiges of racism that abide in my own heart. What I know is that peace, in the grand scheme of things, begins right here with me. If I think the responsibility for peace lies elsewhere, I am gravely mistaken. I must examine my own attitudes, my own stereotypical thinking, my own prejudices; and strive to eliminate whatever barriers hold me back from loving all God's children.

To this end, there are a number of people who have helped me recently. There are a number of courageous people who have allowed me to know them, people who have helped me to see that I still have this soul work to be done, the work Isaiah was hinting at, the work of straightening the road to God, the work of reconciling; the work of peacemaking. What I have come to believe is that it is God who has sent these people into my life.

One of these people is Rabbi Craig Marantz. He drops in on our Tuesday morning Bible class whenever he is able. We have come to respect his wisdom. It's not that he offers a second opinion; it's that he offers us a different perspective on the text, a Jewish perspective.

In his presence, one can not help but examine oneself for the vestiges of anti-Semitism that may lurk. He doesn't do this with any intentionality; he just comes and sits with us for an hour and allows us to know his mind and his heart. I understand his presence among us as a peacemaking presence. I know I am a better person because he has allowed me to know his humanity.

Another of these people is Dr. Reza Mansur, a cardiologist at Hartford Hospital. I got off the elevator the other day in the main lobby, and there he was facing me. We both smiled and we hugged. We both had places to go, yet in that moment of recognition, we both knew that there was nothing more important than being together; greeting each other, asking about the other's family. Dr. Mansur is a Muslim man. I first met him on a Habitat for Humanity work site. We have walked together in the Walk for Hunger that begins at the Hartford Insurance building and winds its way through many of that city's neighborhoods. I have broken bread with him at the close of Ramadan. He has spoken here in our Confirmation class. He allows me to know him as a human being. When I am with him, he takes off his cardiologist's white coat. He shatters all my stereotypes of Muslim men. And he once told me that I have shattered his stereotypes of Caucasian men. I know I am a better person because he has allowed me to know his humanity.

Another of these people is Wildaliz Bermudez, a woman from Puerto Rico who works with the CT Center for a New Economy. Our first meeting was at Day Break. I hadn't told her what color hat I'd be wearing and she hadn't given me any clues as to her appearance. So you can imagine the awkward moment of our meeting. We sat at an outdoor table. She looked right at me and said, "I am from Puerto Rico." It was as if she was asking if that was going to be a problem for me. Instantly, I saw it as an opportunity to become a better human being. Her English is not only better than my Spanish, it's better than my English! Her passion for justice outshines my own. Her delight in working tirelessly matches my own. I knew we would become friends. And we have. When I am with her at Day Break, I am aware of stereotypical thinking that hides in the shadowy places of my heart. But that thinking is melting away now. I look forward to introducing her to this congregation. I have no idea where she goes to church or IF she goes to church. I just know we need courageous women such as Wildaliz. Because she has allowed me to see her humanity, I am a far better person than I was six months ago.

To light the Advent candle of peace is to say YES to the profound notion that peace begins no place else other than right here, in my own heart. Isaiah challenges us to identify the bumps in the road, sometimes terribly obvious bumps, sometimes bumps so subtle they are easy to ignore; and then to iron those bumps out, such that the comfort of God can come and dwell richly in our hearts. This is what was bubbling up for me this week as I wrestled with the text from Isaiah's prophetic word. As always, I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.

