

## “Clearing the Path”

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Growing up in Wisconsin, in the winter, when I was a small boy, we would get some heavy snowfalls. Before we had a snowblower, the snow removal was done by my dad, brother and I, or some combination thereof. I despised shoveling snow as a kid. One of the critical parts of the shoveling was making sure there was a path for the mail carrier to get to our mailbox on the front porch. It was even more important to me during December, because I loved getting the mail to see who sent us Christmas cards. I felt such anticipation waiting for the mail delivery, and then such joy when I saw envelopes sticking out of the mailbox. This of course was back in the time when most people sent Christmas cards. But if the snow on the sidewalk was too deep, our mailman, Jim, wouldn't be able to deliver the mail. So, it was important for us to make sure the path was straight and easy for Mailman Jim so he could make it and not have to struggle through the snow.

The season we are in now, Advent, is like this. Jesus hasn't arrived yet, and we are waiting, the way I waited for the mailman to bring the mail leading up to Christmas. But

we also had to ensure that the snow was shoveled and the path clear and safe for the mailman to deliver the cards. In the same way, we all need to make sure our paths are cleared for Jesus to come to us. We all must do some metaphorical shoveling.

We are all on a path this Advent, waiting for Jesus to arrive. We too want to make a path straight and welcoming for him to get to us, to enter our hearts and minds, our very being as faithful Christians. It's time again to shovel the snow off the path to us, to welcome the Lord to us.

The idea and concept of a path, a highway, is a notable part of the Old Testament scripture this morning from Isaiah, and for that matter, last week's New Testament reading from the Gospel of Matthew. In it, Matthew paraphrases the verses in Isaiah 40 that we read this morning, calling on the people of Judah to prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Isaiah 40 is such a rich text for us to meditate on. There are so many images and so much symbolism to consider. But first, let's consider what's going on in the world as the backdrop for the prophet or prophets who wrote this. What was the need for the Lord's path to be cleared? Why did the Lord need a path?

At the time of the writing of Isaiah 40, the Jews were in exile in Babylon, modern-day Iraq. Their land had been conquered by Babylon. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple occurred in 586, and the Jewish people wouldn't be able to return for another 50 years. In chapter 40, the prophet was offering the people hope. The prophet shared that their punishment of being conquered and sent into exile for their wrongdoing in the past was almost over. Soon they would be able to go home.

Benjamin Sommer writes in the Jewish Study Bible that the prophet is trying to convince the people in part that their God is still powerful and loyal to the people of Israel,<sup>1</sup> even though they have been in exile for years and have suffered tremendously.

The text serves as a reminder to us that our God is still powerful even with all the troubling events in our world. It reminds us, the way the prophet did to the Israelites that God is still loving and caring to God's people.

In Isaiah 40, God shows mercy and love for his people, and he tells the heavenly council at the beginning of the chapter to comfort the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Sommer, The Jewish Study Bible, 765.

The people who have been conquered and are in exile, God says that their penalty is paid and soon they will be able to go home. When they return home, the shepherd will be there to “feed his flock” and “gather the lambs in his arms.” In the ancient near east, the symbol of a benevolent king was a shepherd. The idea of a shepherd as a benevolent king is how Jesus is portrayed in the New Testament, our “Good Shepherd.”

The verses about the path that we hear in Isaiah and the gospels are quite striking. Advent is a time of waiting, but it is also a time of preparation. We prepare ourselves for the arrival of Jesus. The prophet in Isaiah commands people to prepare the way of the Lord to return to Jerusalem. The road will be difficult, but God will be with them, and they will be able to withstand the trouble along the way because God is coming back with them from exile. They are going home to Jerusalem.

For Christians in Advent, it is about preparing a path, a highway for our God, the Lord Jesus Christ, to arrive on Christmas. Those verses in Isaiah, 40:3-5 about making straight the paths, are mentioned in all the Gospels, not just one or two or three of them. But all four. This idea of clearing the way for the Lord speaks to us today in our own lives.

The promised land for us is life and salvation in Christ. Let us clear a path for the Lord.

Let's get rid of the things that don't serve us in our quest to get to know God better and grow closer to the Lord. Turning away from sin. Turning away from selfishness and dishonesty. Turning away from self-pity, bitterness, despair, causing discord, not peace. Turning away from doing harmful things to ourselves and others. Committing sin, which are things that separate us from the Love of God, from engaging in behaviors that separate us from God and God's people.

Let us clear all that from our path, those obstacles that stand in the way of God reaching out to us. We clear the way with those efforts on our part. We can get rid of many obstacles that clutter the sidewalk to our hearts. But we can't do it all on our own. We need the help of the Lord. God gets rid of the big obstacles that we can't do anything about. God lifts the valleys, lowers the mountains and hills, to make the highway to each other smoother. God meets us half-way with forgiveness and love, comfort for us on the way to him. But we need to ask for that help, that assistance, to get rid of those things that get in the way. We need to pray, to ask God to take away a harmful practice we indulge in, or a behavior that hardens our hearts. But if we ask, and we are willing to let go of the things that stand in the way of God reaching us, it will happen, for God does

love us, and wants to grow closer with us. When we clear a path, and the Lord reaches us, a beautiful feeling emerges and envelopes us.

And upon his arrival, the Good Shepherd will take us in his arms, and comfort us, like God comforted the Israelites in Babylon, letting them know he was with them, and he would come to them and be with them on the path back to Jerusalem.

We have choices and we sometimes decide to do the wrong thing. But we can make different choices, and clear away the debris on our way to the Lord this Advent. I challenge you today to get out your snow shovels and put in the work to make God's path to us as smooth as we can, and Jesus can do the rest.

Let us welcome the Good Shepherd to us this Advent. Clear the path for him to yourself. Wait in joyful anticipation for his arrival on Christmas.

prepare the way of the LORD;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God!

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever. Amen.