

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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*Sing: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord”*

When I think of this phrase - beautifully captured in the musical, Jesus Christ Superstar, I think of John the Baptist - baptizing people in the wilderness and preparing them individually to receive the coming Messiah through this ritual cleansing. But this line is lifted from the more ancient book of Isaiah which captures the messages of a prophet deeply connected to God in a communal relationship in a time of great sorrow for the Israelites.

The prophet Isaiah’s message from God is not all about comforting the people, through most of the first half of the book, Isaiah’s prophetic messages are about turning away from sin, turning away from injustice in their community and turning away from their foreign policy that favored war - turning to be in right relationship with God. The dramatic shift in tone to comfort and the return of God comes after Israel has been defeated by the Babylonian Empire and the ruling class of Israel has been forced out of their land, their city, their community, to live in exile as powerless captives in the capital city of Babylon.

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” Make a way for God to arrive here with us now - in our suffering and oppression. God enters into the lives of the exiled Israelites through the wilderness: the wilderness that connects their homeland with their captivity; the space between them and the temple of God; the wild place they would have to cross in order to find home again. God is with them in their captivity and God is with them on their journey home.

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” - Scholars believe this line to be part of a message from God to a divine council of angels - being commissioned to bring a message of comfort to God’s people. Isaiah overhears this commissioning in his prophetic witness to God’s love. I imagine Isaiah in his vision, dwarfed by the divine figures, standing peacefully under a wild canopy of stars. God invites Isaiah into the space between heaven and earth to hear the Good News that God is preparing a way for God’s self to be revealed to the Israelites.

For the exiled Israelites, God’s revelation would clearly be the defeat of their captors and their return through the wilderness to their Judean homeland. However, some six hundred years later, this same text would be used to describe the divine commissioning of a new embodiment of God - in Jesus Christ. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” God is coming to be present with us.

Can we really relate to the vulnerable Israelite community in captivity in a foreign land? Perhaps our strongest resonating identity with the Israelites here is our history as immigrant people: Forced out of our homeland by political, economic or military pressures.

Although we may identify as natives to this city and this nation, we all come from immigrant communities! Even our indigenous siblings have been forced off the lands of their ancestors - forced to abandon their spiritual connection to the land - extracted from their cyclical relationship with the land - forced along trails of tears and genocide to be immigrants in their own land for the progress of the United States.

Our African ancestors were forced to cross the Atlantic Ocean by the European thirst for African Slave labor.

Our European ancestors were forced to immigrate to the United States because of religious

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persecution in Europe, the great potato famine in Ireland, revolutions in countries around the globe.

Our ancestors were forced to leave a homeland, a community, a family, a way of life behind, and learn to adopt new ones that allowed for survival in this new strange land.

We are not so different from the immigrants of today - People forced to leave their homes in the middle east because of wars and governments struggling after centuries of empires extracting wealth from their land. People forced to leave their communities in Latin America because of wars and violence perpetrated often to benefit our US economy.

We, like our ancestors before us, are shaped if not defined by war. We are forced to define our relationship to war: Will we fight as part of war? Will we organize against war? Will we benefit from the economics of war? Will we be traumatized by war?

In a nation defined by war, how can we hope to encounter peace? How can we claim a God who is the Prince of Peace? How can we start each Sunday by greeting each other by saying, “Peace be with you”? How can we hope for peace, when war and violence have always been around us?

Perhaps we can start with an easier question: How do we define peace? We receive messages from our political leaders that peace is the quiet of a subjugated people. We know from our history books that peace is the motivation of nations that go to war. However, our nation has become so used to war that peace is often forgotten all together. Since our last declaration of war from congress when we entered World War II, our country has pursued military action in 37 countries - leading to the deaths of some 20 million people according to Global Research. Our nation’s thirst for war appears only to be growing. Perhaps sustaining peace requires more than the threat and use of violence.

A theological definition of peace is found in McKim’s Dictionary of Theological Terms - describing peace as “Fullness, well-being. A translation of shalom, a Hebrew term used for both greeting and farewell with great richness of meaning. It is much more than lack of war and points to full societal and personal well-being, coupled with righteousness and possible only as a gift of God.” It is wholeness, harmony, and right relations.

This definition points to both a societal well-being and a pervasive personal well-being: right relations between all people. As broken people, this concept of well-being can be hard to relate to. Our society is often motivated by fear instead of love, security rather than justice. Societal well-being has been relegated to the harmonious impossibilities of failed utopian societies. And yet, this societal well-being is possible with God.

This year I have been studying Family Systems Theory as a way to understand myself as an actor in larger systems like family and church. I’m not doing this learning just to diagnose issues going on in my family or this congregation or any other organization. I have instead been learning about myself in this work, and discovering how I participate as a member of a family. I have been learning that the only person I can hope to have any control over in any community is myself - and even that can be a challenge sometimes! This may sound disheartening, but for me it has been liberating.

Have you ever been with family or been part of a group that has done things a certain way as long as you could remember? And has anyone ever tried to change that “certain way” of doing things in this group?

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In my family, there is a tradition of going on a summer vacation in the same vacation town in Northern Michigan to visit the same shops and relax at the same beaches, eat cherries from the same orchards and more recently - taste wine from the same wineries. We did this trip last summer, we did this trip when I was a child, and my mom did this trip when she was growing up!

I have suggested several changes to this trip over the years, a few of which were accepted - like my request to swim at Christmas Beach - which ended up being filled with millions of razor sharp sea shells and ice cold water impossible to swim in - never to be tried again. But most of my requests on this vacation pilgrimage have been denied outright! - Most recently, a request to have everyone in the family discuss end-of-life decisions together and spend an afternoon signing paperwork about our deaths. My sister responded to my idea in a group text saying something along the lines of, “Paperwork is WORK and WORK is not allowed on vacation!” I gave up on this idea quickly, and abandoned it all together. The family pressures to maintain our vacation traditions were too strong to fight for this little project.

It wasn’t until recently that I thought, “Oh, maybe I could work on this project with my family when we are not on vacation!”

Family Systems Theory says that anxiety builds up in families, in communities, and in nations in similar ways. When anxiety builds up from unwanted pressures in relationships, struggles for resources and unprocessed traumas, the system requires an outlet to release the pressure! Sometimes the pressure is released in unhealthy ways, like blaming and attacking one member for the unwanted anxiety. Sometimes the pressure is released in healthy ways, like by talking through the root causes of the anxiety and processing the trauma together.

Healthy responses to communal anxiety are almost always learned behaviors that take practice and require personal strength found in a deep sense of personal well-being - inner peace. People spend their entire lives working toward a sense of inner peace: in prayer, meditation, healthy relationships, and self love.

For me, the request to talk about end-of-life decisions - with my family on vacation - came from a deep desire to know my family better and learn how to support my family in the anxious moments of a health crisis that I had been watching other families go through every day as a hospital chaplain. While my desire to know more about my family was based out of love, it developed into anxiety as I struggled to find a time to have these meaningful conversations; as I continued to watch families struggle with medical decisions when they did not know their loved one’s wishes.

Vacation felt like a lifesaver thrown out to me as my anxiety grew. When my first attempt at relieving this new anxiety failed, I lost all hope that my family would ever work on my project. I didn’t believe I had any control over getting my family together to care for each other in this particular and vulnerable way.

It took me over a year to first remember this concern of mine, and then respond to my need by stepping back to look at the bigger picture. Just by taking some time to reflect on this project away from the stress (all be it - low stress) of my family, I realized something very important to my goal: family vacation was only one week out of the entire year! Instead of waiting for my family to come together on their own during vacation, I could create time to work on my little project with each member of my family at a pace that worked for me. I presented this new “non-vacation” project to my family, and I was amazed to realize that everyone wanted to do this “work” as a way to love each other, just as I had hoped.

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But what does family vacation and end-of-life decision making have to do with peace? If we do not take the time to participate in the Advent work of hopeful waiting, reflecting and preparing for peace on a personal scale, then how can we hope to participate in the work of peace on a bigger scale?

We must be grounded in spiritual practices that allow us to process our anxiety so that we might have the emotional strength and spiritual maturity to respond to the violence and anxiety of others from a place of peace. We must take seriously the call in this Advent season to wait - to prepare - to take time to care for our bodies, to find support in loving relationships, and rely on God in prayer to empower us to live in peace.

John the Baptist must have spent a lot of time working on his own inner peace in order to have the emotional strength and spiritual maturity to respond to his community in a way that they could join him in preparing for the Prince of Peace: “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.”

From his place of personal well-being - set apart from society in the wilderness - John the Baptist was able to care for people of all different types: bringing them out into the wilderness to confess their sins and be freed from the anxiety of their brokenness. John the baptist created an opportunity for the entirety of Judean society to release the pressure of their anxiety through the spiritual practice of baptism and confession.

I was only able to realize new possibilities for my relationship to my family after taking time to care for myself: taking time in prayer, processing my anxiety in personal conversation, and finding renewal in the wilderness - in wild places of nature that help me to set myself apart from the anxiety of the world. These are spiritual practices that have empowered me to find and seek out peace in myself, in my family and in the world.

“In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!” Perhaps we must prepare for peace in the wilderness: Be willing to enter strange and unfamiliar places where we must trust God to help us through: Be willing to be vulnerable and honest about our needs and desires for peace. Be willing to take risks with each other to find that peace.

In our community - where we come with so many different expectations of how to be community for each other, how to worship together, let alone how to seek peace - we must take time to wait in hope - reflecting and preparing for peace by caring for our own bodies, our own feelings, our own spiritual needs - so that as we continue to reflect and prepare for the way of peace in our community, we can participate from a place of groundedness - a place of personal well-being - a place of peace.

We are a community that seeks this peace for each other, so let us encourage each other to take time to prepare. Let us find new awareness for our communal and personal anxiety so that we might create an environment - like John the Baptist - where the pressure of that anxiety can be released: where we can process our trauma, where we can find healing, where we can be in right relationship with each other and with God.

“In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!” Let us take time to prepare the way of peace in our own lives, so that we might be prepared to seek the peace of Christ in the world today.