

Sunday December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Advent II

**PRAYER:** Eternal God, who in Jesus Christ awakens our hope for a new heaven and new earth, we approach you with troubled but expectant hearts. We are troubled by conflicts within, yet reassured by your promise of salvation for those who trust you. We are troubled by conflicts without, yet encouraged by your pledge of peace for those who follow you.

Take from us, O God, the fear that we are not your people, and make us messengers of the hope for peace on earth.

**STEWARDSHIP:** Jesus told us, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Almighty and everlasting God, you have ordained every time as a time of preparation for the coming of Christ. Yet we need the challenge of Advent to prepare for his birth. As with gratitude we recall his coming to first century Israel, let us with joy anticipate his 21<sup>st</sup> century coming to First Baptist.

Deliver us from the temptation to turn this Christmas into just another Christmas. The season’s commonplaces-the hanging of the greens, the lighting of the candles, the singing of the carols, the giving of gift baskets-have all too often become a mindless routine, engaging our purses rather than our hearts, calling attention to our planning rather than our devotion. Forgive us, O God, for allowing this holy day to become a mere holiday, for letting eternity’s invasion of time become an occasion for time’s corruption of eternity, for permitting your symbol of divine self-giving to become our sanction of human self-seeking.

Grant us penitent hearts, dear Lord that we might become bearers as well as receivers of your comfort. Let us make common cause with those for whom Christ’s coming turns bad news into good news: captives in a strange land, strangers in their native land, the neglected poor, the abandoned young, the forgotten elderly, the desperately lonely-all those who have fallen victim to humanity’s inhumanity. O Holy Comforter, as you break once again into our midst, make us channels of your consolation. Proclaim your healing word through our surrendered lips. Manifest your transforming presence through our yielded hearts. Work your gracious deeds through outstretched hands.

As we travel again the road to Bethlehem, let us not forget that Golgotha is our destination. Keep ever before us the connection between cradle and the cross, lest we mute the glory of Christ’s coming and repeat the shame of his going. As we listen to the song of the angels, let us remember the message of Calvary. With an eye toward Jerusalem, let us march to Bethlehem, coming to the Lord as the Lord came to us.

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Isaiah 40:1-11

“God’s Infrastructure Plan.”

All of us from time to time have what we refer to as a “bad day”. A bad day of course is a day when nothing seems to be going right for us. Well, I read about a gentleman by the name of Matthieu Boya who may have experienced the “mother” of all bad days. Mr. Boya is resident of the country of Benin in Africa. Mr. Boya’s really bad day, happened in 1987, when he singlehandedly destroyed his country’s entire air force.

On the day in question, Mr. Boya took his golf clubs, and some golf balls, out to a field that was adjacent to the only military airfield in Benin. In what can only be described as a series of unbelievable events, Mr. Boya took a swing at a golf ball, and severely sliced it toward the air field. The golf shot hit a bird, which in turn dropped onto the windshield of a trainer jet, whose pilot was taxiing for a takeoff.

The startled pilot, lost control of his aircraft, and subsequently plowed into four shiny Albatross fighter jets, totally demolishing the entire Benin air force. Mr. Boya was immediately jailed for “hooliganism,” and his attorney said he had no chance of winning a trial. Meanwhile, the country had no money in its treasury to replace the jets. The government of Benin wanted Mr. Boya to pay the \$40 million-dollar price tag, to buy new jets; this despite the fact that Mr. Boya only made \$275 dollars a year.

Mr. Boya figured it would take him 145,000 years to pay off his debt to society. (Humorous Illustrations, p.15) How’s that for a whopper of a golf story? It does go to show though how one seemingly innocent event, can set off a chain reaction of subsequent actions that can be catastrophic. Such was the case when we lived in Toronto and a simple leak caused major headaches on Bayview Ave. north of Steels.

Underneath the street surface, a water pipe began to leak, washing away soil. At some point, enough soil washed away that the road collapsed leaving a big sink hole on one of the region’s busiest roadways. That little leaky pipe, interrupted traffic, created headaches for residents who went without water, and who were prevented access to their homes. It also disrupted religious services at a nearby Buddhist temple, and Jewish synagogue, and generally, lots and lots of mess.

One little pipe did all that, and we know it is just the beginning in our cities and province. Bridges, roads, water and sewer lines, traffic congestion, under serviced transit, and public buildings are all in need a major repair. And therefore, are all hanging over our collective heads. In fact, there has, of late, been a new phrase coined to express this problem; infrastructure deficit. This refers to infrastructure work that needs to be done, but there is no money to do it.

The dictionary definition of infrastructure is “the whole system of bases, services, training establishments etc. required by troops in military operations or the basic framework of any organization.” We need infrastructure. Without it, societies cannot function very well.

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If you don't believe me, just go to a third world country that has little, or no infrastructure, and see how the people are faring.

No clean water, no reliable roads, or sanitation systems: and people suffer. Knowing then the importance of infrastructure to the health and vitality of people, it is with great interest I read in Isaiah chapter 40 that God is very interested infrastructure. For the people of Israel there was a real infrastructure deficit; not caused by a lack of money or concern, but caused by a lack of faith and obedience to God. Like any good engineer, maybe we should begin by examining the situation, before suggesting a repair.

Things in Israel were pretty bad in Isaiah's day. The prophet, had made clear to Israel many times, that they were being punished for their failure to follow the covenant Israel had with God. A covenant I should say, which began with Abraham, and had been reaffirmed countless times in Israel's history. Besieged by enemies, suffering from food shortages, and failed by ineffective leadership; Israel was in big trouble.

"Comfort, comfort my people", says your God. It is a cry of pain, voiced by the prophet. The double expression of the word "comfort" indicates that these words and feelings were full of intense emotion. And what then are these words of comfort to include? "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone, and her sins are pardoned. Yes, the Lord has punished her in full for all her sins." (vs.2)

The picture emerging here is very touching. Isaiah believes Israel has been fully punished, and now needs the reassurance of God. One cannot help but picture the common scene of a child who is being disciplined, and whose cheeks are streaked by tears. The small child knows they have done wrong, but what terrifies them most is losing their parents love and connection.

A few years back, Laura used to watch this show on television called *Super Nanny*. Have you seen this program? The program centered on a family struggling to discipline their children, and who invited an English Nanny named Jill to come in and sort things out. All in front of cameras. Most episodes reveal a family coping with very unruly children, and parents at the end of their rope in knowing how to regain sanity in their homes.

One of Super Nanny's tricks, in disciplining children, is having a naughty chair or naughty spot, like a corner of the room, or a small throw rug. When a child misbehaves, Super Nanny tells the parents, to place the child on the naughty spot for a brief period of time, after which the parent goes over, and first asks if the child understands what they did wrong, and then more importantly, communicates love and acceptance to the child.

Israel was in the naughty spot with God. They knew it, and they had no excuse. It was a sad and lonely place to be, and now like on *Super Nanny*, they longed to see the heavenly parent come, and embrace them, and tell them he still loves them. Just like with little children, who struggle to restore the relationship with their parents, Israel was struggling to know how to get back to a good relationship with God.

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They knew they couldn't do it on their own. They were stuck in this unbearable situation. Isaiah uses a very interesting word here for pardon. The word implies a double portion of God's grace.

Isaiah is saying that God replies to our state of sin, not with a grocer's weights and scales, where we try to do enough good to balance things out. Instead, all the goodness, all the grace we will ever need, generously comes from God. Only when God comes to our "naughty spot", and reaches out for us, can we be restored. This leads us to God's concern over infrastructure. Isaiah writes, "Listen! I hear the voice of someone shouting, 'Make a highway for the Lord through the wilderness.'"

And what an engineering feat this will be. The hills will be leveled, the valley's filled in, and there will be no obstacles or curves, to slow God down in his coming. God wants to arrive without fail, travel without difficulty, and be un-delayed without hindrance. The picture, that Isaiah paints here, is akin to a village or city in ancient days, working hard preparing the way for a visiting dignitary to arrive.

Another example and more clearly connected to the point Isaiah is making about God occurs in Luke 19, where we read about the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The people lined the entry way from Bethany to Jerusalem, cheering and waving palm branches and throwing their coats on the roadway. The people shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

We might do the same thing today, if say the Queen came for a visit. We would "roll out the red carpet", as the expression goes. In anticipation of the arrival of the special guest, people would line the streets, waving flags, cheering and shouting greetings. "Listen!" Isaiah urges. Listen means therefore, be prepared. It means being actively involved in being receptive to God's coming.

We can appreciate all this imagery about royal dignitaries arriving, but I also see it in a different way as well. Let us go back to the image of a small child sitting on his or her "naughty" chair. As we can guess, the child at first resists the parent's placement of them on that spot. They are angry, embarrassed, and as I mentioned, somewhat frightened. What begins to emerge, however, is a longing in the child's heart, for the parent to come back. They may angrily say they want to be left alone, but the opposite is true.

Depending on where the naughty spot is in the home, the child begins to look for the parent to come back. If they are around the corner, they strain to peek around to see if they are there. If they are within eyesight, they begin to carefully look for signs from the parent that they are going to come back. They look for eye contact, movement in their direction. Can you sense that longing and anticipation?

"O Come, O come Emmanuel!" This is what the ancient Christmas carol is trying to communicate. This same ache of longing is translated to John the Baptist, who quotes this very passage from Isaiah, "Prepare a pathway for the Lord's coming! Make a straight road for him!" (Matthew 3:3)

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So, how do we prepare for the Lord's coming? How do we undertake God's infrastructure plan? Well, we begin by acknowledging our place in God's world. God is God and we are not.

Like with children, where there are clear lines differentiating between parents and their children, there are clear lines between the creator and the created. We are like grass that lives briefly, and fades away. We are like flowers whose beauty diminishes quickly. We are temporary, fragile creatures, at the complete and total mercy of God. To see ourselves as more than that is to place an obstacle on his pathway.

To prepare we must also examine our hearts, to rid ourselves of those things that create a valley or hill between ourselves and God. To prepare we must acknowledge our need for God to come. We need God to come. His coming is our only hope for restoration and renewal. On our own, we are lost. Finally, and this is a grand observation, we prepare ourselves for his coming, by acknowledging the reality that his coming is a good thing.

His coming is good news! The Greek word *evangelizo*, which we translate often into evangelism, actually means more accurately "good news". In verses 1-2, Isaiah's word's point to Jerusalem, now in verse 9, he calls on the people of Jerusalem to shout to the world. Receive the good news, and shout it to the surrounding people.

To evangelize means to tell the good news. Get ready; be of good cheer, your God is coming. The message is in part a wonderful image of God. Isaiah is fond of this phrase "He will rule with awesome strength." Isaiah uses it in different passages, but its literal meaning is wonderful. In Hebrew, Isaiah is saying that the strength of God will be revealed, as God rolls up his sleeves and gets to work. Isn't that a marvelous image?

God will also appear with his reward, meaning literally "the spoils of his victory". Then to top off this beautiful picture of God, Isaiah moves dramatically from a picture of physical work, or even battle, to one of God as a shepherd, gently caring a lamb. It is a special picture, because it reminds us that as children of God, he comes to where we are on our naughty spots, and flexes not his muscles, but offers his heart.

That's the good news, that if we prepare to receive him, God will come, and roll up his sleeves, to clean up the mess of our lives, and at the same time cradle us like little lambs. Who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't want God to come to us as the frightened little children that we truly are, and hold open his arms, and embrace us, and tell us that he loves us? Only a fool would refuse that offer, but some people do refuse.

That is why we persist in telling the world that God has come in human form to seek and save the lost. No wonder Jesus' birth is so vital, so needed. We can't fix this mess we've made. No matter how hard we try, we cannot balance the scales to gain God's favour. But it does not matter, because God has tipped the balance in our favour by sending Jesus to us. This is Good News!

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News, that is certainly good enough to shout out to the world. News good enough, to compel us to climb up the nearest mountain and shout...hey, wait a minute, I've heard that somewhere before. Ah, I remember, *Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.* Isaiah writes that when God comes, his glory will be revealed. I've heard that before as well.

I seem to remember in Luke chapter two, some shepherds watching their flocks, encountering an army of angels, who sang of Jesus' birth this way, "*glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors.*" Guess what, Jesus' coming reveals that he favors you and me. God's glory is reflected in his people. God's infrastructure plan hasn't really got anything to do with: actual roads, bridges or water pipes. God's plan, for the restoration of this world, begins with you and me.

**BENEDICTION:** Rest in the assurance and comfort that God shepherds you in wisdom, gathers you to his side and holds you close, never to release you from harm. This is the season of mercy and of joy! Go now in the strength of God's saving love to shepherd the lone and the lost, whom Christ would draw to his flock. Amen.