

Sunday December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Advent II

Isaiah 40:1-11  
“Clean Up Crew”

In a scene played out millions of times every Sunday worldwide, a pastor was greeting people as they left the morning service. However, in one church things were a bit different as a couple approached the pastor shaking his hand and said, “Pastor that was a wonderful sermon. We listened to every word.” The Pastor replied, “Well that’s great. I guess we will see you next week” “Afraid not”, said the couple. “We will be going somewhere else”. “Stunned the pastor asked, “But why.” “Well, the lady said, “We want a second opinion.”

The reality is that it is one thing to notice that there is work to be done. Which we explored last week. It is quite another matter to determine that you are the one who needs to do that work! This week’s worship centers on perhaps the scariest topic of all for a church community and that is about commitment. It’s a subject that could be hard to approach when a large part of the congregation is still worshipping online.

It is a subject your deacons and board of managers and CE committee wrestle with all the time. How do we get folks to commit to ministry when simply getting together is difficult? What does the ministry look like in this pandemic era? Especially as it appears that covid and other viruses are making a resurgence in our area.

How might we be about the business of lifting valleys and bringing down hills so that the way of the Lord is prepared? My first reaction and yours might be that it seems beyond us. Especially when we seem so limited these days. Where do we start? We should always start with prayer. Not because there isn’t anything else we can do. But because that is where worship always begins. We pray, and we learn to pray, and we practice praying.

And what should be the subject of some of our prayers? Clearly, we need help identifying the hills that we need to be praying get moved out of the way so that God’s way can be accessed. What are the valleys we are confronting, and who is down in those valleys that need to be lifted so that they can see the one who comes? A caution first though. We don’t pray because we’re helpless. We pray because we know where the power is.

So, in this second week of Advent, we pray. We pray as though we were members of a clean-up crew, knowing we are making a difference in the world and in the lives of those around us. But prayer doesn’t prevent us from acting or from giving or serving or working. The clean-up crew has plenty to be doing. What Christmas ministries are we used to doing in this season? Our fellowship is involved in several. Do we know what they are?

Our attitude needs to change as well. Rather than simply saying we can’t do that now; we need to rethink how to do them. Like, how could these ministries be done in a physically distanced way, protecting workers and recipients both? This is not the time for the church to sit back and wait for a return to normal. I am not sure there is a normal. This is a time for creative thinking, for an Advent spirit of anticipation and hope as we long for a new reality.

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Some are saying that sounds more like a mission's rally than a worship service. There are some similarities, to be sure. But here in Advent, we are looking forward by making ready. We are anticipating rolling up our sleeves and getting to work. We do ourselves a great disservice by failing to recognize that worship is a call to action, not simply an opportunity to feel good about ourselves. We receive a spark to put our worship into action in the world around us.

Can you hear God issue the call, this second Sunday of Advent. Inviting the worshipers to join the clean-up crew. Can we let the work be as physical as possible, as well as spiritual; let it be as communal as it can be, as well as individual. There should be both a desire to do something after the benediction is pronounced and something clear to do. There needs to be a plan for follow-up of this worship.

Yes we need to be involved in getting the church prepared for guests to come to us as we get closer to Christmas. But don't let all the work, all our calling, be inward-focused. So, how will we invite our community to join us? How will we make it clear that we care about their lives and not just the numbers in the pew or logins to our YouTube channel?

Worship cannot begin and end in the sanctuary or online stream. It must grow out of real needs in the lives of the worshipers and the communities in which we live, and then it has to feed out into those communities, even as it continues to work on those who shared the worship experience.

If it helps, let it begin with the lighting of the Advent wreath. Communicate that the light isn't to be kept inside only for those gathered in person or online. But it is hoped that this flame will bring light to the whole world. Because we are the ones who know that company's coming. Having surveyed the mess around us, the next step is to ask who is going to do something about it? Who is going to step up and clear away the rubble? Who is going to be a part of the clean-up crew? Who is ready to work? *<Crickets chirping*

It sounds harsh to hear but believing is not enough. J. Edwin Orr, a popular evangelist, loved to speak to university students. When he had such an audience, he would usually pick out some young innocent looking young woman and ask her to stand. He would ask her, "Do you believe in marriage?" When the woman would inevitably reply, "Yes!" he would follow up by asking, "Why?"

The young woman would usually explain in some way, that she believed in marriage because it was an institution that gives stability to a sexual commitment, provides context for raising children, and provides an assurance of deliverance from loneliness throughout the life cycle. Orr would then say, "So, you're married!"

If Orr chose the right young woman, she could be counted on to protest and say, "No, I'm not!" To which Orr would respond that if she believed in marriage, then it could be said she was married." The answer almost always came, "I haven't got a man yet, or haven't made a commitment." "Exactly!" Do Orr would respond. "It's not enough to believe! You must make a commitment, and there must be someone to whom you make that commitment.

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It's not enough to say you are a Christian if you have no commitment to Christ. A commitment must be lived out in activity for the Kingdom. But it's so very hard to find willing hands attached to willing hearts. It can be frustrating for the church and for missional organization. We feel like that sometimes, don't we? We feel that no one is listening; no one is responding. We keep issuing the invitation, but it often lies unattended in the midst of the people of God. We aren't even sure anyone even heard the call.

We like to know we are being heard. We desire two-way communication, which means, of course, that we must learn to listen as well as to speak. And maybe, we should listen more than we speak. What is that old saying? God gave us two ears and one mouth. Advent isn't really about communication, yet when you read the passages for this week, you can't help but hear that theme underneath. The proclamation is, in part, about hearing and being heard.

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Mark 1:3). John appears every Advent to remind us that we haven't been paying enough attention. He shouts to wake us up. He dresses oddly to capture our fascination. He storms up and down the riverbank, asking us to take the plunge. He doesn't seem to be here to listen. He is here to talk, to announce, to shout — a one-way communication, you would think.

Except John is asking for something from us. He is asking us to join the road crew. We've got streets to level and curves to straighten. Whether we think in personal terms about cleaning up our own hearts and bodies, straightening out our behavior patterns; or in communal terms of justice and anti-racism as we make straight the pathways to wholeness that have bent in ways that keep certain people out — either way, there is work to be done.

A response needs to be made. John wants us to be participants in our own salvation; the one who comes doesn't overwhelm us, doesn't transform us against our will. We are partners, contributors in the conversation of hope and transformation.

Yet, some will argue, it is all about marching to the tune of the one in charge. Right? It is not about conversation; it is about obedience. It is about following orders. Get to work; clean this up; take care of that; do this; don't do that, and on and on and on. That is hardly a two-way street, some argue. This is the Lord's highway we are straightening. And we all know that it is the Lord's way or the highway! Right?

Not according to Isaiah. We must get the whole picture. This conversation doesn't begin with Jesus or with John. It began long before that. Jesus was a response. Listen to this: *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 (40:1-2).*

*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 (40:9-11).*

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God heard the cry, and now comes with a response. God has listened and now speaks, and the word God speaks is Jesus. Oh, that wasn't the word that the first hearers of Isaiah's words heard. They heard home. The people of God were in exile, cut off from the land they loved the land that God had promised to them, the land where God took up residence. They felt alone, cast adrift in an unfeeling, uncaring world.

They cried out to God; they confessed that they had forgotten to live as God's people and we are now paying the price. Their society had begun to cater to power and influence and wealth, and many suffered because of it. They forgot to look out for the ones on the margins, and now they were all on the margins. The systems in which they had placed their trust were no longer strong enough to support the life they took for granted. So, they cried out. And God heard.

And God will bring them home—not necessarily to the home that they envisioned, but to the home that God envisions—the community that God calls us to create. The relationships that fulfill us and connect us—this is the home we seek, all of us. And it is the home we find in Jesus. The child in the manger and the savior on the cross speak of home to us. Home is where we are loved and healed and heard.

The glory of Christmas is that while there is a silent night, there is a need to listen and to shut out the distracting noise of the world and our own brokenness, it is fundamentally a dialog. The Lord's highway is a two-way street. Our call is to listen and to respond. To announce, actually, to proclaim. To make way: *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!"*

Company's coming, and so we need to get ready. We need to make ourselves ready, make our world ready, for the one who comes to lead us home. The joy is that we get to be a part of the clean-up crew. This isn't a menial task; this is the glory of the Lord. This is a sign that we are those who know that company is coming, and we want to be ready. We want to be inclusive. We want to be hosts for the one and the ones who come. Get to work; company's coming.