

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Advent 2, Year A, December 8, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Prepare the Way of the Lord"
Matthew 3:1-12

the sound of the ram's horn shofar blowing; "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, prepare ye the way of the Lord"; do you recognize this? perhaps you recall this is how a singing solo voice begins *Godspell*; this 1971 musical brought Matthew's version of the gospel first to Off Broadway, then to Broadway, and later in a film version to movie theaters across the country and the world; and now you can watch it for free on Youtube

those words, "prepare the way of the Lord," came originally from Isaiah (40:3-1); they are also found in Mark (1:3), Luke (3:4), and John (1:23); any passage that appears in all four gospels shows its key importance; Isaiah's 40th chapter is one of the most loved and quoted chapters of the Bible; and in a musical piece that long predates *Godspell*, we also hear it in Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*; today I do want to look at what these words meant, originally in Isaiah's time, then in the time of the gospels, and finally, what they mean in our time

in Isaiah's time, Israel's exile in Babylon was nearly over, and the prophet reassures the Israelites of their future back in Israel; what looks like their abandonment by God, was only their temporary punishment for their sins; now that price has been paid, they will be returned to Israel, and other nations will come to know who God is, because of what God will accomplish in restoring these people

so for Isaiah, God is "preparing the way of the Lord" in a prophetic prediction of the easy pathway between Babylon and Jerusalem upon which the people will return; think of a literal highway; I watched years ago as an old mountain road was replaced by I-26 between Asheville NC and Johnson City TN; to straighten and level the road they actually filled-in valleys and they lowered mountain tops; but think also of a figurative easy pathway; God is assuring the people they will be able to survive the trip; the road will be easy to travel because God will be with them

in the time of the gospels these verses are associated with the work of John the baptizer (he wasn't a Baptist!); the people are not in exile in foreign country, but they are in exile in their own country, which is occupied by a foreign power, the Romans; again the message is assurance that God will once more do a great thing for the salvation of this people; this is the good news that John is proclaiming, even though it doesn't sound much like good news

what John was doing was preparing the way of Jesus; and he is setting the stage for a type of unofficial ministry of power that will take place outside of the established corridors of religious authority; in mountains, fields, and beaches, instead of inside synagogues and the Temple; with farmers, fishermen, women, and Samaritans, instead of with the religious leaders; John was getting people to look at their lives by their fruits, by what their lives actually produced in terms of good for them and for others

preparing the way of the Lord is what people are doing by coming to John for his baptism for forgiveness; they are getting their own hearts, minds, and lives ready in preparation for a new work that God is about to accomplish through Jesus; they are called to holiness; they are called to repair their relationship with God

in our time, today, we do not seek a new or different meaning from these previous ones; rather all of the previous meanings carry on in the context of our lives; God is telling us to prepare the way of the Lord; like the returning exiles, every day for us is a journey in our relationship with God; God makes the road, but we have to get out on that road and walk it; we have to lead the kind of life that glorifies God

and also, as John did, we lay the groundwork for Jesus' continuing work; we arrange our lives in such a way that we can respond to Jesus' call to lead a life of holiness; we involve ourselves in the kinds of ministries Jesus began and we now continue; and we look around us to see if there are any people we know or come into contact with who might benefit from us speaking about our faith to them; we need to find ways of making a smooth road of entry for Jesus into the hearts and lives of those around us

so Advent is not just about getting ready for Christmas by making sure that decorations, presents, cards, and parties are all planned and ready; those are good things; but don't let those things crowd out the most important spiritual

focus that is needed at this time of year; Advent is more about us getting ourselves ready for Christ, by making sure that we have prepared the way of the Lord into our hearts and lives, and into the hearts and lives of others; so along with everything else we have on our to-do lists for this month, keep this phrase uppermost in your minds and hearts; stay focused and “prepare the way of the Lord”