**Preaching Notes for the Second Sunday of Advent, Year C (December 6, 2015)**

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[**Luke 3:1-6**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=96#gospel_reading) **(**[**1:68-79**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=96#psalm_reading) **response)**

When I was growing up in northwest Arkansas, there was a road between Fayetteville and Little Rock that was known locally as the “Pig Trail.” It was the most treacherous road in the area. It took people directly over the top of the Ozark Mountains, and the road consisted of steep climbs, sudden drops, and hairpin turns for about thirty miles. The road was called the “Pig Trail” because during football season Razorback fans from Little Rock, many in RV’s, would line up bumper to bumper to slowly make their way to Fayetteville by way of that road. It was nicknamed the “Pig Trail” because it was the route taken by generations of Arkansas Razorback Hog fans.

In the years since my childhood, the state of Arkansas built an interstate highway between Fayetteville and Interstate 40 (which runs east-west across the state from Fort Smith to Memphis, passing through Little Rock on the way). They started building Interstate 49 when I was in high school. It took them more than ten years to complete the road because it also crosses a portion of the Ozarks known as the Boston Mountains. In order to make the road straight enough to travel at high speeds, they had to level the mountains, and in one place, tunnel through. Making a straight road between Fayetteville and the cities and towns in the central and southern parts of the state was not easy. It took many years of hard work.

I always think of the mountains I grew up in when I read the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth…” (Luke 3:4-5, NRSV).

The words that the Gospels say John the Baptist preached are a quote from the prophet Isaiah, which means that they were written five hundred years before the birth of Jesus, or a little over twenty-five hundred years before this modern-day time in which you and I live.

But neither Isaiah nor John the Baptist was talking about a road like the Pig Trail or even the new interstate when he spoke these words some two and a half millennia ago. Each was using this metaphor not to describe the changes to the landscape that occurs when a road is built, but the changes that need to happen inside the human heart.

When Isaiah said,
“prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain” (Isaiah 40:3-5, NRSV),

Isaiah was trying to speak a word of hope to his people. And when John the Baptist quoted Isaiah five hundred years later, he did so out of faith.

Isaiah wanted to give hope to his people, who were being carted off into the Babylonian exile. They were in crisis. They were frightened about their present and concerned for their futures. Their land had just been conquered. Lives had been lost. Cities had been desecrated. The few who had survived had been taken prisoner and were being taken off to a foreign land and they had no idea if they would ever get to return to their homes. Life as they knew it was over. That was the situation to which Isaiah originally spoke those words.

But the situation was different when John the Baptist quoted Isaiah to the people of his time. John the Baptist was announcing the coming of the Messiah, and he was calling for repentance. The crisis he was speaking to was not an outward, national crisis, but rather the inward, personal need for the people of his day to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

John the Baptist wanted people to straighten up not the roads through the countryside, but rather the crookedness and brokenness in their own lives, in their own hearts. He wanted people to take a close look at their lives and confess that they had rough places within them that needed smoothing. He wanted people to take a public vow that they would try to straighten out the crooked parts of their lives and be baptized in the Jordan River as a sign before God that they intended to change their ways. His call to the people of his day was to encourage them not to run away from their problems, not to avoid God’s judgment, not to try to flee from the wrath to come, but to change their lives and, in doing so, change their world. His call was to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

When the crowds asked him how they were to do this, he said, “If you have two coats share one with a person who has none; do likewise with your food.” He told the tax collectors not to collect any more than they were authorized. He told the soldiers not to harass or cheat anyone, and to be satisfied with their pay. In other words, he called upon people to straighten out their lives by caring for the lost and the least among them.

I believe the call that John the Baptist was making to the people of his time is a call that we need to hear in our world today.

When I look back over the year of our Lord, 2015, I’m amazed at how much suffering we have witnessed. When I looked at the mass shooting tracker for 2015, I noted that by October 25, 2015, there had been 312 recorded mass shootings in the United States. See <http://shootingtracker.com/wiki/Mass_Shootings_in_2015>. (Note that a mass shooting is defined as four or more people killed by gun violence in a single incident. This definition does not include people wounded by gunshots in a mass shooting event.)

The year 2015 also bore witness to one of the greatest refugee crises in modern history, as hundreds of thousands of Syrians fled their war-torn country in an effort to stay alive.

We watched planes go down and massive lives being lost to natural disasters.

Every time we watched a disaster unfold on television or our computer screens, the talking head looked for someone or something to blame. Who sold the guns to a mentally disturbed person? Did the friends and family of the shooter bear some responsibility for not alerting the authorities? Is it our lifestyles as human beings that is causing the weather to become more violent?

And while it is always tempting to look outside ourselves to look for a reason or for someone to blame when something terrible happens, we need to hear and heed John’s call to look inward just as much as we look outward -- especially during the season of Advent, which is so much about looking inward and examining our own hearts as we prepare to receive the Christ child into this world and prepare for Christ’s coming again.

But it is not easy. It is hard not to indulge our anger or spend our time looking for someone to blame when terrible things happen. It is difficult to focus instead on straightening out our own lives, working to change all those old bad habits into better ones, and trying to become the kind and loving and generous-hearted people that God calls us to be.

But I believe that is exactly what we must call our people to do. Because in spite of all that has happened in 2015, the season is still Advent. Christmas is still coming. We are still waiting, and John is still calling us to prepare ourselves for the good news that a Savior is coming to save this crooked, broken world. As followers of Jesus, we are called to prepare the way for all the earth to receive his message.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Luke 3:4-6, NRSV).

It would be appropriate to end your sermon with an invitation to some kind of congregational response. One option would be to join together in reading [Luke 1:68-79](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=96#psalm_reading) responsively. You can find the “Canticle of Zechariah” in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, page 208.

Another option would be to create a litany or congregational prayer of thanksgiving inspired by the Philippians passage (see notes below).

[**Malachi 3:1-4**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=96#hebrew_oth_reading)

The name “Malachi” means *my messenger,* and God sent the prophet to bring a message to the people. Malachi was active in the years following the return from exile. The Temple had just been rebuilt, and the people were trying to get back into a routine of pure and pleasing worship of God. But it wasn’t easy. There was not much political or social stability. So much had been lost during the years away. There was a lot to do and not much time left over for things like prayer, sacrifice, and worship. In particular, the priests had been offering blemished animals for sacrifice, and the people had not been providing tithes sufficient for keeping up the building or the salaries of the priests.

The words in today’s reading are a response to a dispute. The people had been asking questions about the nature of God. How could God be both omnipotent and benevolent when evil continued to thrive in the world? If God wasn’t going to punish the wicked and reward the righteous, then what difference did it make whether people were observant or not? “Where is the God of justice?” they asked (Malachi 2:17).

So the prophet points to the future as the place when God’s justice will prevail, encouraging the people to remain steadfast in both their faith and their practice until that day so that they can stand when he appears.

During Advent, we preachers are like both the prophet Malachi and John the Baptist. We are bringing the message of God to the people that they are to prepare the way of the Lord and be steadfast in faith and practice until the day of his coming and coming again.

[**Philippians 1:3-11**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=96#epistle_reading)

In this lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, Paul writes to the church to encourage them to pray constantly for one another. He entreats them to pray when they feel anger and resentment and fear.

Paul wrote this letter to his friends in Philippi from a jail cell. I’m sure that sitting there day after day, with nothing to do but think about what had landed him there and his anger toward the people who tried and convicted him felt overwhelming at times. I know that when I feel overwhelmed by my own anger or depression or frustration or resentment, I feel distant from God and sometimes find it hard to go to God in prayer.

Paul says that what kept him going, what kept him out of that place of despair, was remembering the good people who were praying for him and working for good in the world up in this little church in Philippi that he loved. He was able to pray and to feel closer to God, when he thought of those wonderful people who loved Christ. And it seems to have given him strength to make it through another day.

He says,

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. . . And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight, to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

Paul prays that these folks may cling to hope, love, joy, hope, and peace, and to fight against the tides of human nature so that in the day of Christ they may stand pure and blameless before him. Perhaps again like last week, you might find inspiration in Paul’s words of hope for the people of his time as a springboard for creating a prayer or litany for your congregation to pray in response to your sermon.