

“Paving the Way”

Advent 2023 – part 2

Isaiah 40:1-11

[1-Title slide] You are in the right place this morning. Take a look around you. We are here to worship God together. We are here to be in community. Each one of us has given up something valuable to be here today: time. It is a sacrifice we freely make because we know how much God loves us. If you are here for the first time, and you think it is only accidental that you are even sitting in your pew, remember this: your presence is no surprise to God. You are here for a purpose: to worship the Lord Almighty.

I invite you to pray with me.

God, before whom all hearts are open, we gather in this place to call on your name. We are your people, and you are our Redeemer, our Rock in whom we trust. As we worship you, Father, Son, and Spirit, bring your power down upon us. Change our hearts; mold our wills to conform to the greatest desires of your heart. Help us to know the joy of serving you. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

[2-snowy roads] In Michigan this time of year, it’s no surprise when we have to drive on snowy roads. I’m usually good with driving winters, but sometimes, I have a little bad luck. One year, I took my Prius down a two-track road to find a place to go cross-country skiing. Everything was fine as I was driving downhill, but when the road turned up, I had no chance. You should see some of the cars trying to negotiate Sharon Ave. by the parsonage. It’s impossible with the steep incline.

The first storm each winter makes me notice every single obstacle that prevents us from reaching our destination: Fallen trees. Black ice. Steep hills and valleys. If you have to drive on snow and ice, you know, a flat, clear road is always better than dealing with ups and downs and curves and other obstacles.

[3-bulldozer] Before I became a pastor, I studied civil engineering, so I know a little bit about road construction. I know it takes an enormous amount of energy and time to build a level road. To make a brand-new road through the wilderness, you have to clear the land with huge earthmovers, flattening out hills and filling in valleys. If you have ever done any trail clearing you know, making a path in the wilderness is hard.

[4-Isaiah 40:3] When I first read Isaiah 40:3, I put the comma after the word “wilderness,” like this: “A voice calls out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord!’” The adjective identifies the location of the voice, not the road. The voice is in the wilderness, right? But actually, the placement of the comma changes the meaning slightly. “A voice calls out [comma], ‘In the wilderness make a way for the Lord!’” In other words, build a road through the wilderness, so that God can approach.

The thing about wilderness is, there are no roads! If you want one there, you have to build it yourself. You have to overcome obstacles like mountains, canyons, bandits, wild animals, and snow drifts.

Why would Isaiah want someone to build a road in the wilderness? We want to drive in the city. No one really wants to go to a place where there are no roads at all, do they?

[5-exiles] In this scripture, Isaiah is proclaiming comfort to Jerusalem. He is speaking to the exiles of Israel, who lived in Babylon as slaves. If anyone felt like

they had nowhere to go, it was them. This road Isaiah wanted built was to bring the Israelites back out of the wilderness, back home to Jerusalem.

These Israelites were in pretty bad shape. They were fading, like the grass of the field, scorched by the hot wind. Like debris left behind in a terrible wildfire, the Israelites felt spiritually dried up, burned up, and lifeless.

[6-lost person] That’s the way a lot of people feel in this world. Lost. Lifeless. Stuck in a huge canyon with no way up. Lost in the wilderness. Trapped on a high mountain with no way down. This can be because of health issues. It can be because of addiction. It can be because of family dysfunction. You can feel rejected by those you love. You can even feel rejected by God. Trust me, that’s what the people reading Isaiah thought. God had left them. God had placed obstacles much worse than a foot of snow between them and their homeland. If you have ever felt lost, you can relate to the exiles.

[7-GPS] When I drive on treacherous roads late at night, I feel a lot safer if I have a guide. If I turn my GPS on, even if I know where I am going, I am still reassured by that little voice. “In 500 feet, turn left onto US-41.” I know someone has prepared a way for me to get back home. The roads have been plowed and salted. There are some street lights. The things I take for granted nine months out of the year...OK, six months out of the year in Houghton...those landmarks and that GPS voice reassure me that I can reach my destination. Someone made a way for me.

[8-John baptizing] John the Baptizer was like the GPS for 1st century Palestinian Jews. While they weren’t in exile, they sure felt like God had forgotten their Roman oppression. The gospel of Mark describes John’s mission to these people.

[9-10] *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, ²as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:*

*"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—*

*³"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"*

⁴And so John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Mark 1:1-5)

John thought of himself as the voice calling out of the wilderness. But he was also the guide, the one who paved the road in the wilderness. He showed the way for people to leave the wilderness of their sins. He prepared the way for Jesus by helping people repent. John shouted the good news so they could hear it.

[11-12 - Isaiah 40] Look again at Isaiah 40. God has great news for the people coming out of the wilderness. Isaiah says their hard times, their punishment has been completed. (vs. 2) He promises the rough ways will be smoothed, mountains leveled, valleys filled in. (vs. 4) He predicts that all people will see God's glory. (vs. 5) He declares that God's word endures forever. (vs. 8) That's good news!

[13-Isaiah 40:9, man on mountain] In verse 9, there is a bit of irony. The messengers are supposed to go up on a mountain to shout the good news. If all the mountains have been leveled, where are they supposed to find one? Actually, not all mountains have been brought low. There is still one mountain that serves as a landmark, while all the rest have been made level. It is the mountain of God. Figuratively, it is God himself.

Isaiah proclaims, “God is here!” God has brought his comfort. God has brought his power. God is both a ruling king and a gentle shepherd. It is not often you find a powerful leader that is both strong and compassionate. More often, we find those qualities to be mutually exclusive. A leader usually has to been either one or the other. The good news is, God is both.

[14-Mary and Jesus statue] What is the world looking for this Christmas? Doesn't everyone want to hear some good news? Don't people want to know that if they are lost, they are not forgotten, not stuck? Christmas is the time to proclaim that God has made a way for us, through his son, Jesus, the Savior. We must prepare ourselves to receive him.

[15-Let every heart] One of my favorite carols is “Joy to the World.” In the first verse, we sing, “Let every heart prepare him room.” Christmas is not just about lighting some candles, singing some songs, and opening some presents. We have to prepare our hearts for Jesus. If your heart is full of hard obstacles, you won't find a way through the wilderness. We all need to clear the way for Christ.

[16-Man repenting] John said the best way to prepare for Jesus is to repent, to confess that we have screwed up. We have been unkind, unloving, greedy, selfish, impatient. We have failed to care for the poor and overlooked injustice. The truth is, people like to hear about love at Christmas, but rarely do we enjoy hearing about our need to repent. Isaiah and John the Baptizer, however, teach us repentance is the only way that we fully make room in our hearts to receive Christ as Lord.

[17-Shepherds nativity] The ones who emptied themselves were ready for Jesus. The ones who had no internal obstacles were the first to see the Savior.

The shepherds hardly had any possessions. When they heard the announcement from the angels, they immediately got up and searched for Christ. John the Baptizer lived a simple life in the wilderness. He prepared the way for Christ. He plowed the road, paved it, and set up some big orange road signs (figuratively) that said, “Jesus is coming!”

[18-Hope-Despair signs] Maybe you feel lost, like you are in exile. Will you return home? What voices will you listen to, as the world watches and waits for Christ’s return? Will you make room for Christ by removing the things that hold you back? Will you level the mountain of your pride? Will you fill in the valley of your depression? Will you forsake your possessions, lest they possess you? Will you prepare your heart to receive Christ as Lord? Will you be the voice that leads others to Jesus?

[19-Invitation] This Christmas, we can proclaim God made a way. We can shout the good news. I’m going to make a simple challenge to you. “Everyone reach one.” Invite someone new to our Christmas Eve Candlelight service in two weeks. Bring them here so that they can hear the greatest love story the world has ever known. God can use you to make a way through the wilderness of someone’s heart and find God’s comfort and love. And on Christmas Eve itself, we will be receiving an offering for Western UP Food Bank, as a gift to Jesus, and as a reminder to all of us that we have not forgotten what our mission is.

[20-Title slide] In the wilderness make a way for the Lord. Together, we can pave the way so that truly all the people will see the glory of the Lord together.

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse:

Isaiah 40:3 “A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Reflection Questions:

1. When have you been lost on a difficult road? What brought you to safety?
2. How did Isaiah prepare the exiles to return to God? How did John the Baptist prepare the people to receive Christ?
3. What obstacles prevent you from making room in your heart to receive Jesus? What can you do this Christmas to remove them?
4. Whom will you invite to worship Jesus this Christmas? Who is your “one” in “Everyone reach one”?