

ADVENT JOURNEYS: GRACE AND LOVE

“PREPARING THE WAY”

Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 1:57-79

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

This Advent, we will be focusing on the grace and love we experience as we walk the paths of faith. But before we can talk about love and grace, we need to set the context for the specific journey we are on. This week, I am talking about the journey implied in the words of Isaiah, the prophecy of Zechariah, and repeated by John the Baptist as he begins his ministry. “A voice cries out: ... prepare the way of the Lord...” writes Isaiah. Zechariah prophesies about his son, “You will go forth before the Lord to prepare his ways.”

In both cases, the path being prepared is a path of return, the way back home. In Isaiah, the faith community has been living in Babylon, exiled from their home in Jerusalem. The path through which they must return is wilderness. They would have to walk through deep valleys, and over high mountains. Many dangers await them. But the prophet tells them that the mountains will be brought low, the valleys lifted up, the rough places made smooth, and the dangers of the wilderness will be set aside. The journey will be smooth, easy, and safe.

This is the comfort Isaiah offers: a homecoming with all the obstacles removed. But the preparation is only necessary because the faith community had lost its way. And they had lost it before the exile. The exile helped them to see it.

Zechariah lives in a time when Israel was occupied by the Romans. They, too, had lost their way. We see this in Zechariah’s story. He is serving in the temple when an angel of the Lord appears and tells him of the forthcoming birth of a son and its meaning for Israel. Zechariah wants proof (as if the appearance of an angel weren’t enough). And so he is stricken dumb. He can’t tell anyone about this until the question of the child’s name is raised. Then he seems to find his way and speaks a word from the Lord.

Not only does he seem to find his way, but he says that John will lead the community back to its faith. He will “prepare the way... give knowledge of salvation through forgiveness... give light to those who sit in darkness... and guide their feet into the way of peace....”

Advent is a season of preparation, a time for repentance, a path for coming home and renewing faith. We begin this journey first by acknowledging that we have lost our way. Our return will have to look a little different from Israel’s under exile or under occupation. We find ourselves already at home and comfortable like the Romans. But this doesn’t mean that we don’t feel lost.

A high school or college graduate may be anxious about the next step in their life. “What will I study? What if I don’t feel drawn to anything in particular? Should I even go to college? Can I find a job in my field? What if I can’t?”

Unemployment, underemployment, or lack of fulfillment in a job create a sense of loss and anxiety about the future.

We sometimes lose ourselves in grief. A spouse dies? A parent or child dies? We feel lost when an accident takes away our ability to walk or compromises our hearing or seeing. We feel lost when deep friendships come to an end.

We feel lost when memory starts to fail us. Some people forget the names and faces of their children, and quite literally lose their way if allowed to wander off. And those who love these people feel lost in having no power to prevent this decline.

Some people do experience a similar loss to the Jews of Isaiah’s and John’s day. A transgender youth prevented from participating on the boy’s team feels oppressed by the state that regulates against that. A man is ostracized from his faith community because he starts including more than fetuses in his understanding of “pro-life.”

Many feel lost in a culture that calls victims, criminals, and liberals, terrorists. School administrators are oppressors. Health experts and scientists are either liars or trying to hide something from us. The deniers are commanding the stage claiming that racism and sexism are imagined, that people aren’t contributing to climate change, and that the vaccine doesn’t really work. Meanwhile, women who kill their abusers in self-defense go to prison, sea levels rise, and hospitals are filling up.

We feel lost in the face of individual experiences and in the context of a culture that just baffles us. It’s not happening to us as it happened to Israel in exile and under occupation, but we know what it’s like to be lost. And just as many people lose their faith, so we, too, sometimes feel lost in our faith. Isaiah and Zechariah speak to a people going through a crisis of faith. Can we hear these prophets in the midst of the cacophony coming out of many churches today? Can we find our way back and discover the grace and the love that sustains us and our faith communities on this journey?

As I’ve said many times before, it all begins with grace and grace never leaves us. Feeling lost? Look down and notice that you are already on a path, a path that leads home in both directions. Maybe there’s something you need to recall from long ago to ground yourself in the love of God once again. Or maybe there’s something ahead that will renew your energy and hope.

Just stand still for a moment and remember that we’ve been here before, lost in some personal struggle or in despair over the world around us. Remember that God did not abandon us. God walked with us through that challenge and many challenges since then. Feeling lost? In a state of exile? Your world occupied by strangers? Just stand still. You don’t have to do anything in this moment because God is coming. That’s grace.

“Here is your God!” proclaims Isaiah, “who will feed the flock and gather the lambs.” “Comfort, comfort my people! The days of trouble are coming to an end!” Zechariah announces that God “has looked favorably on the people... has raised up a savior.” God is coming!

You don’t have to fix whatever is wrong. You don’t have to get over it. You don’t have to figure it out right this minute. Just stand there. Wait. God is coming. That’s the grace that roots us in faith. That’s where Advent begins. A deep breath that reminds us that we may not know where we are, but we’re not lost... never lost because God’s grace is for all times.

But while we’re waiting, these prophets tells us that someone is coming to make ready the path, to prepare the way. For Isaiah, that person was called “the servant of the Lord.” For some, the servant came to be identified with the Messiah; for others the servant was a stand-in for the community of faith. Zechariah refers to John the Baptist as the one coming to prepare the way. As followers of Jesus, we are the ones assigned to “preparing the way” today. This sounds daunting perhaps, outside our skill set, we might say, or too much responsibility. But what it really is, is grace, a privilege, and where we often experience God’s love.

When we feel lost and are having a crisis of faith, it’s often because we feel inadequate for the task. We despair because success seems so impossible. Our culture will always value individual freedoms over the common good. Greed will always be a more powerful motivator than love. Racism and sexism will always just morph into a different form. It’s hard to keep the cynic in all of us down.

I usually cringe when people say, “We’re not called to be successful, we’re called to be faithful.” I know people intend it to be motivational, but it feels to me like either self-righteousness or an excuse for failure. It can be a recipe for trying the same things over and over again instead of imagining other alternatives.

Having said that, I think it is important that we not be too obsessed about outcomes. Our call is to prepare the way, not be the way. Success, whatever that is, does not depend on our efforts alone, but on the grace of God. The grace that comes to us as followers of Jesus is not the achievement, but the participation. God is coming! And we get to participate in preparing the way.

We can’t give our loved one back her memory, but we can be there for her, see that she has what she needs, and look for new ways to love her in the present and treasure the beauty of the past in our hearts. We can insist that the institutions to whom we entrust her daily care treat her with dignity and kindness and fight against the trend to warehouse our elderly and infirm in places designed for profit over the love and care of people. The nurse who takes the time to make sure residents are clean, dressed appropriately, and interacts with them with kindness and dignity, won’t necessarily change the system, but he participates in preparing the way.

I've read so many books about racism the last few years. I know about the long history of the struggle to end it and how it has just adapted itself to take different forms. I know about the church's complicity with racism. I don't see it ending any time soon. Success seems unlikely. But reading about people like Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X; engaging in conversation with many of you; and the occasional march with like-minded strangers feels like a part of God's call to "prepare the way." It's a privilege to learn about, meet, and work with people committed to this struggle. Against a backdrop of a society still unaware many inequities, there are many people committed to justice and motivated by love. This is part of the journey, part of the grace and love of God that meets us on our way.

As part of "preparing the way" we get to experience grace and love when we help a young person sort out there future, when we deliver a meal to someone just home after surgery, when we offer a shoulder to cry on to someone experiencing grief. We get to experience the love and grace of God in the kindness we offer, the ministry of care that we deliver, the healing and reconciliation we contribute to, the times in which we advocate for the excluded, the oppressed, the abused, and the disenfranchised.

In "preparing the way," we are not bound by the message other churches preach, by the drive to succeed, by the greed of consumerism, or by a desire for status. As followers of Jesus our message is not about condemnation, the accumulation of wealth, or the fixation with power. We are bound only by the love and grace of God.

Martin Luther King Jr. said in his famous speech, "I may not get there with you, but I have seen the Promised Land." He didn't know the details of what his activism might bring, but he knew where he had to be and what he was to be about. As we begin Advent, we return not only to the beginning of the church year but to the beginning of walk of faith: a recognition that God has entered into our lives and that we are privileged to participate in making known the love of God. We may not get to the place envisioned either, but along the way, the grace and love of God sustain us. Though we feel lost at times, we are fundamentally a "found people." Thanks be to God. Amen.