

## Advent 2C 2021

Today we hear the famous words of Isaiah as quoted by Luke.

“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.”

This is often interpreted as a reference to some external event in the distant future.

That is, it is taken to mean that there will be a day when God magically clears our path to heaven.

All the roads will be made straight and all the hills flattened so that we will have easy access.

Such an interpretation takes the burden off of us in the present.

All we have to do now is to be obedient children so that, at the coming of the Lord in some distant future, we will be among those who easily travel towards heaven, saved from the fate of those who are disobedient, those who will be thrust into hell.

Salvation, in other words, does not require a change of heart, just behavior.

It is about reward for obedience.

While we wait on this future benefit, we get to look down on all those naughty people who are not loved by God the way we are, those who are destined to eternal abandonment.

This interpretation relieves us of responsibility to others.

We just have to avoid breaking the rules, but need not actually build up others.

What Luke is actually saying, through this quote from Isaiah, however, is that *we* should  
prepare the way of the Lord.

The Lord is not making *our* paths straight.

*We* should make the Lord's path straight so that the Lord might enter our hearts without  
impediment, and we do this not by looking down on our brother's and sister's, our  
fellow children of God.

We do so by repenting, says Luke, and here he uses a word that means to think on a  
higher plane.

That is, instead of despising those who are not like us, we should think on a higher level  
and recognize that we are all struggling together, all on the same team.

Some may indeed be doing better than others at the task of loving one another, but the  
only person we have any control over is ourselves.

It is for *us* to model the way of reconciliation, compassion, justice, and truth to those  
who still do not understand that we are brothers and sisters.

We all have a choice, in other words.

We either can be like the bully who, arrogant in his physical strength, enjoys lording it over others, or we can think on a higher level and be like the gym trainer who shows those interested in strengthening themselves how to do it.

There really are only two ways to be, you see: the way of love and the way of hate.

We either dedicate ourselves to lifting others up (and to allowing others to lift us up), or we comfort ourselves with a false sense of superiority as we look down on those who do not meet our standards.

I say *false* sense of superiority because as soon as we think we are better than others, we are one of the lost, one of those dedicated to hatred, to despising those who are “less than us.”

We become like the pharisee who prays, “Oh Lord, thank you for not making me like this sinner.”

It might sound like a zen koan, but we are only better when we know that we are the same.

Jesus repeatedly tells us this.

He instructs his followers, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes

to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”

In other words, the first shall be last.

Those who think of themselves as better than others, those who are bullies, whether quiet or overt, are lost.

We are first when we serve, that is, when we lift others up, when we model humility, grace, justice, love, peace, joy.

That is how we make straight the pathway of God into our hearts.

John’s baptism of repentance that Luke is referencing here does not magically wash us clean.

This is yet another way that we seek to relieve ourselves of responsibility to others—dunk and done—but baptism does not make us ready for heaven.

It is our desire to dedicate ourselves to building others up that makes us worthy of baptism, a ritual that recognizes that we desire to disavow the way of hatred, selfishness, greed, arrogance, shame, and fear.

First we change how we think, we think on a higher plane, and then we are baptized in recognition of that life-changing decision.

This is not necessarily an easy shift.

Malachi tells us that it can be like going through a “refiner’s fire.”

Letting go of our devotion to bullying, to superiority usually comes, in other words, after much humbling.

Initially, we think that we are going to figure out the trick to life.

We are going to be the first ones ever to take control and achieve all our goals, and we will do it on our own, without any help from others like our parents who kept us alive, our elementary school teachers who taught us to read and to add, the people who built the roads that allow us to get where we are going.

Nope.

We are going to achieve *our* goals all on our own.

We are going to solve a puzzle that does not exist, we are going to win at life, but there is no competition.

We mistake life for a maze, for something that must be solved, rather than a labyrinth.

In a labyrinth, there is one way in and one way out, the same way for everyone.

We simply put one foot in front of the other and follow the path.

It can be difficult to give up on the conquering approach, like going through a refiner's fire indeed.

Our life experiences humble us, purify us of our arrogance, if we let them.

Life has a way, in other words, of bringing us down to earth.

We may start out to be conquerors, but, if we grow, we end up as servants.

It is for us to prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts, not in some distant future, but  
now.

We do so not by forcing others to conform to some standard, not by lording it over them,  
but by working together to create a safe, supportive, caring place.

That is what we strive to be here, a safe place to explore, to feel, to question, to mourn,  
and to rejoice—a place to be fully ourselves with others.

We can find friends in all kinds of places, but there are few places where one can go to  
build relationships with those who have dedicated themselves to learning about  
the way of love.

It is not easy to find a group whose purpose is to build the kingdom of heaven.

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.

As Paul said to the Philippians, so I say to you: “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.”