

Sermon, "A Highway for Our God"

Toronto United Mennonite Church, 5 December 2024

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The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

[Isaiah 40: 3]

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed these words to the people of Judah and Jerusalem some two thousand seven hundred years ago. This morning, in the waning days of 2024, I would like to invite us to explore this question again: what does it mean to make a highway for our God?

Good morning. My name is Alison Li and it is my privilege to speak to you this Second Sunday of Advent. Last week Lori introduced us to our Advent theme by speaking to us of hope as we watch and wait for the one who comes proclaiming God’s righteousness. This week, our two scripture readings take us deeper into this theme by asking us to meditate on the words of the prophets, the lonely voices crying in the wilderness.

In the Hebrew Scripture, prophets appear at times of great turmoil and confusion. The prophets bring words of hope and comfort, but at times also admonish and rebuke the people when they have gone astray and have failed to follow God’s way. Their words serve as a proclamation to remind people of God’s perspective and plan.

Some of the prophets hear words. Some are given fantastical images like Ezekiel who tells us of seeing a cloud with flashing lightning, and in the fire at its centre, four living creatures each with four faces and four wings, and beside them on the ground, wheels sparkling like topaz, rimmed with eyes, each intersected by another wheel. All the prophets have the challenge of trying to convey what has been revealed to them by God to an audience of ordinary human beings. How can they share the powerful, strange, wild reality that they have been given a glimpse of? How can they put it into language that people can understand?

Our first scripture reading is from the book of Malachi. The author of this book speaks as God’s messenger to the people of Jerusalem around 450 years before the birth of Jesus. At that time, the people of Israel had returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, but were experiencing great adversity. Malachi talks about the poor harvests and pestilence they had faced. And what’s more, Jerusalem was just a small and insignificant part of a great Persian empire. So where was the fulfilment of God’s promise to make of *this* people a great nation?

In this book, Malachi speaks to some who have remained faithful, but also to doubters, cynics, and those who have become indifferent. Malachi’s answer is that God will not fail, and that Israel must recommit itself to repentance and to trusting in God. He proclaims the day is coming when the

messenger of God's promise will suddenly arrive. But he asks, "Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?" Because, as Malachi explains, the One who comes will be like a refiner's fire and a washer's soap.

What Malachi does here is interesting. He uses imagery taken from what would have been two important technologies of the Ancient Near East that must have been familiar to his listeners. The first image is of metal working. Most silver was mined as ores that contain a mix of different metals such as copper, tin, and lead, as well as other elements and compounds. As early as 3000 BC, metalworkers had developed ways to refine these ores to extract pure silver. So, by Malachi's day, smelting of silver had been understood for thousands of years. It was done by crushing the ore and heating it in a complicated multi-step process using a series of different temperatures and conditions that would finally lead to purified silver.

The second image comes the making of woollen cloth, another important trade and technology. Cloth-making too was a multi-step process requiring the scouring of the wool with a soap or detergent to remove oils and dirt, and then pounding the cloth with hands, feet or clubs to thicken it and make it more waterproof.

Malachi uses these two well-known technologies as metaphors to explain in a clear and memorable way that God's purpose will not be to destroy, but to purify.

Growing up, one of the hymns I learned as a child was "All Things Bright and Beautiful." Perhaps you will know the words too:

All things bright and beautiful,
 All creatures great and small,
 All things wise and wonderful,
 The Lord God made them all.

This beloved Victorian hymn has survived in our hymnal as number 177 in *Voices Together*. It was written in 1848 by an Anglo-Irish poet and hymn-writer named Cecil Frances Alexander for a book called *Hymns for Little Children*. You may also know some of other hymns she wrote such as "There is a Green Hill Far Away" and at this time of year you may hear her "Once in Royal David's City."

In these lyrics, she delights in:

Each little flower that opens,
 Each little bird that sings, [and says]
 He made their glowing colours,
 He made their tiny wings.

The hymn-writer urges us to see God’s work in the beauty of the world around us. She was probably inspired by the ideas of Natural Theology which were current in the early 19th century, which argued we can see proof of God’s existence in the perfect design of the natural world.

Just eleven years later, in 1859, Charles Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species*, his theory of evolution, and after that, our sense of how the little birds and flowers arrived at their lovely shapes and functions, how all living things relate to one another, became much more complicated than Mrs. Alexander might have imagined. In the one hundred seventy-four years since “All Things Bright and Beautiful” was written, our understanding of the universe and our place in it has only become more complex, wondrous and strange. From the Big Bang and an ever-expanding universe to the neutrinos that are so tiny that a hundred trillion of them are careening through your body this very second, we’ve learned so much about the world, especially the unsettling fact that our common-sense view of the world can be deeply misleading about the true nature of things. It seems the more we learn, the more we appreciate how little we know. And the more powerful our technologies become, the more critical are the questions about how we should use them.

This is why I was so taken by the hymn “Planets Humming as They Wander” *Voices Together* 175 when we sang it a few weeks ago at Michele’s farewell service and why I asked Elizabeth and our worship team to include again in our service today. This hymn was the winning entry for a competition in 2010 at the Boston University School of Theology. The hymn-writer is Heather Josselyn-Cranson who was inspired by the ancient Greek concept of “the music of the spheres,” the idea that the proportions in the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets make a kind of musical harmony. But she joined this ancient theme with images drawn from contemporary science.

Josselyn-Cranson tells us of:

Atoms quiv’ring deep inside us, cells abuzz with energy.
Particles [that] are chanting psalms in tiny, holy synergy.

From neutrons to spinning galaxies, Josselyn-Cranson gives us a hymn of praise to the majesty and mystery of God’s creation with imagery that is suited to the 21st century. But if our vision of God’s great creation and plan has become vastly more complicated and puzzling, if, as we look around our world, it seems—in the words of another old hymn—“the wrong seems oft so strong,” we struggle to make sense of what is happening and feel disheartened, let us listen to the voices that cried in the wilderness for the clear counsel they still give to us.

In our second scripture reading from the gospel of Luke, Luke describes the early ministry of John the Baptist who proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke understands John as fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy; John is the one who prepares the way for the coming Messiah.

Luke reminds his listeners of Isaiah’s words, the promise that every valley will be filled, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain. And it is a promise

that “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” God’s promise is made not only to Israel but to all humanity.

Advent is a time of watching and waiting, in the cold and darkest days of the year. As they did in the strife and uncertainty of their own day, the voices of the prophets reach out to us in our time, to call us to repentance where we have strayed, to turn us back towards God’s truth and light, to remind us that in a constantly changing world, the only enduring reality is God.

So, when the voice in the wilderness calls out “prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God,” what might that mean for us today?

Unfortunately, there are not many surviving texts that describe the technology of road construction and maintenance in the Ancient Near East in Isaiah’s time. What we can gather is that roads were mostly unpaved except for important trade routes. Under the imperial structures of the day, the responsibility for roads lay with the local populations who had the task of preparing the roads for the movement of people, goods, and...kings. In practical terms this probably meant that it was the local people who had to continually stake out these routes, level the ground, and consistently maintain the road surface. If the prophet had lived in our climate, perhaps he would have said something about shovelling sidewalks as well.

When John the Baptist meets the crowds who come to be baptized by him, he assails them with fiery words: “You brood of vipers!” he says. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”

So they ask him, “What should we do then?”

John answers this way: “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” To the tax collectors he says, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” To the soldiers he replies, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” He tells them all, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” These are clear, simple instructions made to each of his listeners, keyed to who they are, what they have and what they do.

So, making a highway for our God works as a metaphor for me right now. I think it tells us we are asked to care for our own patch of road according to our abilities, to level the ground where we see it is uneven, continually turn from error and stake and re-stake the right path, fill in the potholes and unceasingly maintain the road.

This Advent, this is my hope for us: that, as in the time of Isaiah, Malachi, and John, we might make our way through the coming days of uncertainty by doing our own faithful road maintenance.

Thanks be to God.

Malachi 3:1-4

3 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. **2** But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; **3** he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. **4** Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3: 1-6

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, **2** during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, **4** as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.

5 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,

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”