

December 9, 2015
Isaiah 40:3-5

Advent Midweek 2
Prepare the Royal Highway

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There I was just back from vicarage in my fourth year of Seminary, sitting in perhaps one of my favorite classes...*Preaching Old Testament Lessons* with Dr. Reed Lessing, an Old Testament guru, who can the Old Testament in Hebrew. In that class we would share sermon illustrations and we would write a sermon as a class each week. One of the illustrations was shared by my professor, he said, "There I was, sitting in a Lutheran church in south St. Louis. I was all of 22 years old and this church was to be where I gained my initial experience in becoming a pastor. During the closing hymn two little ladies walked up the aisle, stepped up to the altar and took the flowers. I thought, "This must be a St. Louis Lutheran custom I am not aware of yet." This was repeated every Sunday. After six months my curiosity finally got the best of me. I asked one of the ladies, "What do you do with those flowers?" She replied, "Young man, we take them to the people who are sick after the sermon."

People get sick from sermons!

Or what the pastor who one Sunday was preaching on every book in the Bible, that would be 66 of them. The sermon kept going on and on and on. Finally, yes, finally, he finished with the Book of Revelation, only to realize that he bypassed the book of James. He told the congregation of his mistake and then asked, "What am I going to do with James?" One man shouted from the back, "Pastor, you can give James my place, I'm going home!"

People get sick from sermons!

Everyone has jokes and the wisecracks about the length of the sermons, but you know people get sick from sermons for other reasons. Some of us don't listen to stewardship sermons, because they think the church needs to stay out of their money and time.

Sermons also make people feel uncomfortable when they strike a nerve. When the pastor "steps on toes". If a sermon points out one of your shortcomings – you are liable to get defensive. One Sunday a preacher was preaching on the 10 Commandments and one of the members was voicing his approval..."preach it brotha" "You tell 'em". But then the pastor hit the commandment that everyone in the church and community knew he was breaking; he changed his tune. We've all had that feeling, including myself, and I don't sit in the pew very often... "How does Pastor know about my sins? Quit meddling in my business!" None of us like being told that we are wrong. So you know what. Sermons calling people to repent will get people sick.

These words "prepare the way of the Lord" spoken by Isaiah and speaking about John the Baptist. John the Baptist came to preach repentance. He proclaimed..."Repent for

the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” The Lord is coming. He was all about confronting people with their sin. He struck the nerve, he hit the sensitive spot. People were calling him a lunatic and tried to dismiss him. This call to prepare...to repent...is call to change. You need to change. Straighten the path for him. DO things right. You know...”Get your act together.” Stop sinning. And when you hear your pastor preaching a message like this, he has to tell it like it is...and it makes people feel uncomfortable. So uncomfortable at points...they might even leave or might even come back to the pastor and tell him, he can't preach like that anymore.

The owner of the greenhouse hired a young man whom he had judged to be a hard worker. Although the owner's judgment proved to be correct, the greenhouse plants began to die. Then the owner called a more experienced gardener to remedy the situation. Soon the plants began to grow larger and healthier. The owner was puzzled, “What made the difference?” The experienced gardener explained, “When the young man moved the plants, he did it with great caution and care. But I was rough with them. I disturbed their roots. Plants flourish when you shake them up at their roots.” I learned that this year to shake up the roots after you take them out of the pots before planting them into the soil.

People flourish when you shake them up at their roots. People flourish when they see the need for repentance. People flourish when they repent. Have you felt yourself when in times you need to repent and you do...and you begin to see yourself flourish for the Lord. However, we do not like to have our roots shaken. It's only good if he's shaking everybody else up...but when it comes to me...he can't do that. You know what...your sin isn't any better or worse than the next. Sin is sin. It all deserves to be punished and that is why you and I need to repent. You and I need to repent, and one flourishes when you or I repent, whether it's on Sunday morning or in the private in my office.

Repentance is something we need to do on a daily basis. IT's the basis of Isaiah's message. It is John the Baptist's message. “Repent for Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” We are miserable sinners...each and every one of us, and we need to repent. Oftentimes we are stubborn...perhaps like a type of animal that we see as stubborn.

I heard a story, where a Lutheran church in Milwaukee was having their annual outdoor nativity pageant with live animals. One evening, the donkey wandered off and entered a nearby bar. Upon seeing the donkey, one customer pushing his glass aside and decided he had enough. The bartender tried to calm him down by saying, “Oh, don't let that donkey bother you. He belongs to the Lutheran church down the street.”

There are a lot of donkeys that belong to the Lutheran church. I know, because I am one of them. I can be as stubborn and stick-necked as anyone. I need to repent of my sin as anyone else.

These words of Isaiah's prophecy were directed to those who were being carried off in the Babylonian exile. Because of the repeated disobedience of God's people. God was

going to allow them to be conquered by a foreign invading army. God's glory was going to leave His people.

In the early days of Israel's history...before the time of Kings, a story is recorded in 1 Samuel 4 in which the Philistines defeated the Israelites and captured the Ark of the Covenant. The ark led them through the wilderness and it contained the 10 Commandments. It represented God's presence with His people. One woman, whose husband died in the battle, gave birth shortly after and named her son, Ichabod, which in Hebrew means "no glory," saying the glory has departed from Israel.

God's glory left his people at the time of the Babylonian exile. Ezekiel 8-11, is the prophet's vision of his withdrawal from the Jerusalem temple. It begins with people making an altar in the temple to "the idol that provokes jealousy (8:5). Elders had their own idols (8:12), woman worshipped Tammuz (8:14), and others bowed down to the sun (8:16). Bloodshed and violence filled the land (9:9). The abominations drove the Lord from his temple (8:6). Leaving in stages, as a jilted lover, he found it heart-wrenching to leave the people he loved."

Now that sounds depressing...and quite frankly it is. Isaiah reminds us of the faithfulness of God, in spite of the faithlessness of His people. The voice crying in wilderness tells the people to prepare the way of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate and permanent expression of God's glory. The Shepherds saw the glory of the Lord when Jesus was born and they were terrified. *"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear."* In the infant Jesus, they saw God's glory in human flesh. *"The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

At our Lord's transfiguration his glory was displayed when his clothes became dazzling white.

But on Good Friday his disciples deserted him. His garments were gambled away. Then his Father turned his back. As Jesus cries out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* the Lord's presence leaves the Temple alone to die upon the cross. We once again have an Ichabod...no glory.

But his glory doesn't remain away forever...the glory returns on Easter and this means that the day is coming when, at the Second Coming of Christ, all flesh will see God's glory.

Advent, like Isaiah's text calls us to prepare. So How shall we prepare?

Really in just one word – repent. For then we will God's glory in a Babe in a manger; in his body and blood at the Table, and in the eastern sky on the last day. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.