

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” The first time the Hebrews heard these words from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, they were in bondage; in captivity in Babylon. They were 500 miles away from their beloved Jerusalem, and they felt distant from God as well.

The words were a little different then. The period was in a different place. “The voice of one crying out. In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” These words announced the coming end of their captivity. They thought that God had finally found them out there at the edge of the world. They were finally going home.

What they found in these words was in all probability not at all what they had expected. The journey home was a tortuous trip, probably of well over 500 miles through deserts, over mountains, and across valleys. And when they arrived home, they found Jerusalem in ruins and the temple thrown down. The memories of peace and prosperity they had so cherished in Babylon, were not awaiting their return to be fulfilled, they had been lost. After all those miles they felt no closer to God.

It is 500 years later when the Hebrews again hear these words from the mouth of a prophet, this time a wild man by the name of John. It seems brutally clear to me that they could not help but wonder what they would mean this time. They found themselves again in a kind of bondage, subject to the Emperor of Rome. But instead of being carted away to a foreign land, their homeland was occupied by a foreign army; the Roman army. Though they were still in Jerusalem, many felt no closer to God. There was so much that got in the way, separating them from God. Yet, in spite of all this, God was about to find them again. I do not doubt that there were many who wondered what kind of journey they were in for this time.

And what of us, two thousand years after that, as we hear these words this Advent season in a land struggling with fear, reeling from another mass shooting? We find ourselves in a bondage of our own making, slaves to the guns and violence that we thought would protect us, at the same time we huddle in fear, afraid of “the other” that surrounds us, building walls that only serve to isolate us within and without. What journey do these words presage for us? What straight way must we find through the wilderness if we are to have any hope of finding the Jerusalem of our

hearts?

Journey is such a common motif for the spiritual life, and the life of faith. Early Christians were known as the “Followers of the Way.” Today we all talk about the spiritual journeys we are on like we are road builders bashing our way through the wilderness, chopping off mountains and filling in valleys as we go. It’s so easy to forget what we are really doing, or what we really *should* be doing. In our exuberance, we think of the road as *our* way, and we forget that we are preparing the *Lord’s way*, not our own. To prepare the way of the Lord is not about building a road to the place where God lives, it is about building the infrastructure needed to allow God to move through our lives, and through us, into the lives of others. It requires us to do the work and then get out of the way. Funny, we always seem to know it’s important to do the work, but so often we forget the “get out of the way” part. We so want to be in charge.

As I was preparing this sermon this week it suddenly became clear to me that our desire to be in charge, to impose our will on others, in America at least, has a symbol. That symbol is a gun. A gun is not an instrument of cooperation or community. It is an instrument of coercion and force. It is anathema to the cross. It may be that we live in a society that still needs guns, though I am not convinced, but I am sure there will be no need for guns in the kingdom of God. I truly believe that it is God’s will that they become useless; that we live in a society where justice rolls down like water, and righteousness like a ever-flowing stream...all of us. That is our road to make straight in the wilderness.

It is time for the people of God to find again their prophetic voice; to remind the world that there is a different way to live. A way that brings new life in the face of death. A way that brings hope and faith in the face of fear. But more than speaking, we must live as a resurrected people, unafraid of death; live as a faithful people, full of hope in the midst of the surrounding fear. And then we must get out of the way. Make room for God to work through us, and in those around us. And we must wait for the Lord to lead, and listen for his voice.

As I read the opening of St. Paul’s Letter to the Church at Philippi that is appointed as one of the readings for today, I couldn’t help but think how it applied directly to us. “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now...It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me...And 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, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the

glory and praise of God.”

We have been working together to prepare the way of the Lord for a while now. And our effort has been blessed. Now is the season of Advent, that time when we remember that the Lord is coming. Coming along the way we have made. Coming to us in ways we would never have thought possible. And coming into the lives of those we meet through us. For the Lord will lead us with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come only from God. The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.

Amen.