

Pointing Toward the Light and Lamb 2023  
Isaiah 40:3-5, 7-8 John 1:6-9, 19-29

### Isaiah 40:3-5, 7-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

### John 1:6-9, 19-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

When I went to Ghana for a course I took during seminary,  
we spent about a week in the mountain region near Abetifi.

The local pastor who was guiding us, also carefully instructed us,  
trying to prepare us well for an audience with the village chief.

He explained and described local customs, proper protocol & manners  
so that we would make a favorable impression with the chief,  
and be welcomed to stay in Abetifi for a while.

That pastor had an important task to do **so that we would be ready.**

The New Testament passage we just read is about John the Baptist,  
who is described as also having a **similar and important** task  
of **preparing the way for the coming of Christ** -- vs. 6-7, 9 & 29

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

Some priests and Levites came to John in the wilderness,  
sent from Jerusalem by Pharisees to find out who John is ---

- he answers, not the Messiah, not Elijah and not one of the prophets.

Their conversation continued, vs. 22-23

Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

This passage is letting us know that John's ministry  
was in fulfillment of that ancient prophecy of Isaiah  
**to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.**

John's response is a most revealing and significant answer.

The Isaiah text we read is really a description  
of God's plan & promise that's meant to comfort and reassure  
the Hebrew people who were being held captive in Babylon,

- that God had not abandoned them, but still loved them,
- was working a plan that would bring them home again  
and re-establish the defeated nation of Israel.

**God's promise and plan were really a sign of God's abiding love.**

When the Babylonian army conquered a foreign land or country,  
it was their strategy to bring the educated and skillful  
to Babylon for them to make a new life and home there,  
**for the benefit of the empire and to prevent insurrection.**

Isaiah's message was about the hope & encouragement of God's promise,  
to bring them home, to clear a path through the wilderness, vs. 3-4, 8

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway  
for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall  
become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed... The grass withers, the  
flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

**God has a plan and is preparing a way through the wilderness,**  
as an assurance that God's promises will surely be fulfilled ---  
**and though all else of this world fails, flounders & fades,**  
**yet God's word, God's grace & goodness do not, not ever.**

Through Isaiah, God was promising the people living in exile,  
that there is no valley deep enough and no mountain high enough,  
no wilderness remote enough and no desert inhospitable enough,  
**to prevent the Lord your God from coming to you  
and bringing you hope of rescue and salvation.**

The voice in the wilderness is a call for the people to get ready,  
and not to let anything get in their way, block or interfere.  
**So prepare & remove any obstacles that might hinder God's blessings.**

However, during those many years of living in Babylonian captivity,  
many of the Israelites had grown accustomed to being in Babylon,  
had built businesses, prospered and raised their families,  
**and so the ways of Babylon were familiar and felt like home to them.**

The Promised Land, and the stories about Israel as their homeland,  
had become a distant memory of their grandparents and ancestors--  
and now the descendants of those taken in exile to Babylon,  
**were settled into a comfortable lifestyle for themselves.**

The only home they had ever known was Babylon and its culture,  
so they had no desire to trek back through the wilderness,  
and try to start-over to **rebuild a new life back in Israel.**

From chapter 40 on, the book of Isaiah functions like a travel agent,  
trying to encourage all the Jewish people dispersed in Babylon  
to pack-up and return, to journey across the wilderness,  
to build their life anew in Israel, in the Promised Land.

In Scripture, the words Promised Land, Babylon and wilderness  
are all intended to be understood as **symbolic spiritual metaphors.**

**The Promised Land** means more than just dirt, valleys and fields,  
but represents a **spiritual matter** of receiving what God has given,  
as a symbol of God's steadfast faithfulness & promises fulfilled.

This passage from Isaiah is about far more than just  
a literal migration from Babylon back to the land of Israel...  
... but is framed as a theological issue... a reawakening & return to God,  
as a spiritual call: **prepare and make straight a highway for our God.**

**Babylon** symbolizes corruption, complacency and unholy compromise  
of buying into this world's flawed perspectives, ways and values.

Babylon represents being distracted **and spiritually complacent,**  
and buying into culture's materialism, corruption & depravity,  
rather than staying loyal, faithful and focused on God,  
and living within the Lord's ways of grace and blessings.

The message of Isaiah 40, to leave Babylon, is a call to recognize  
the ungodly compromises and distractions of our own lives—  
**to fully prepare, and make way to receive the Lord anew.**

**When God is up to something, it often begins in the wilderness.**

Moses encounters God first at the burning bush in the wilderness,  
then the Israelites spend the next 40 years in the wilderness,  
where God gave the 10 Commandments, sustained them with manna,  
preparing them to live as God's people in the Promised Land,  
**for it was in the wilderness that they became the people of God.**

**A wilderness journey** describes the sacred and spiritual experience  
of the chosen people of the Lord listening, waiting and trusting,  
as we're being touched, filled and inspired, as we are growing  
into a deeper, more focused & authentic relationship with God.

Notice that John's ministry is also happening **in the wilderness.**

That is most significant because all through the Old Testament  
the wilderness was the place where God ministers to his people,  
where God has prepared them to receive his blessings,  
and sets the stage for God to fulfill his promises.

Also, for us, the symbol and experience of **a wilderness journey**  
can also mean a place of testing, of spiritual preparation,  
of learning to pay attention, and growing deeper with God.

**So it is crucial for the people of God to step back occasionally  
from the frantic rush and responsibilities of our busy lives  
and pause to notice and appreciate the works of our Creator,  
and to feed on the truth, hope, wisdom and promises of God,  
and deal with our obstacles in life & all that stands  
between us and a life faithful to the Lord our God.**

That comes as a call for us to examine our lives and our living,  
our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak,  
our relationships, integrity, our walk of faith with God,  
our commitments & choices, our use of time and resources ...

**...and if we're are not headed toward God & becoming more Christ-like,  
then stop and listen, repent and turn around while we can,  
and don't keep going further away from where we want to end up.**

And know this, that sort of repentance  
is not a matter of sitting around feeling guilty or ashamed.  
Repentance is turning to receive the blessings God intends for us,  
**and it is living out an appropriate and faithful response  
to God's wonderful gifts of grace, compassion and love.**

It is also significant that the people had to journey out  
into the wilderness intentionally to see John the Baptist --  
which represents their repentance and spiritual hunger  
**all in preparation for the coming of Jesus the Lord.**

In a similar vein, the true purpose and call of Advent  
is for us to make our own journey into the wilderness,  
also in preparation for the coming of Jesus the Lord.

For we too can find ourselves too comfortable and compromised,  
too complacent amid the corruptions in our world of "Babylons"  
**distracted by flawed and destructive ways and values  
that can keep us from experiencing the full measure  
of the peace and blessings our God intends for us.**

Just as God loved, planned, promised and fulfilled way back then,  
so today God is still at work, and still accomplishing grace & good  
in our lives, in this church and in the world today, right now.

**God says, "I love you and that's why I made you the way you are.**  
I did it on purpose, because I have wonderful plans for you,  
and if you let me, by walking in my love and my blessings  
it will definitely satisfy & make your life meaningful."

During this season of Advent  
the point is to consider what we are doing with our lives,  
**and if our relationship with God through Christ  
is really all that it should be and needs to be.**

The point of Advent is to examine our lives honestly and critically,  
to test our values, our priorities, our goals, and our spirituality  
thereby preparing us for Christmas, for the coming of Jesus.

**Advent is about moving us forward and toward the Truth and Peace  
of being capable of receiving more of God's promised blessings.**

I have a file cabinet in my office at home filled with old papers,  
that we've moved from one house to another house several times,  
but that I hadn't looked at for many years, even decades.

It's been easy to let things accumulate, so for the past few months  
I have been slowly working my way through some of those old files,  
and began pitching out papers that I know I'll never need.

It's been a process has also meant revisiting forgotten memories,  
and it has been fascinating to reflect and reconsider  
how many things that I'd considered crucial and necessary,  
in retrospect, in the long run, really don't matter at all.

**Advent's a good time to ask "What are the things that do truly matter?"**

The truth is, sometimes we let life just happen to us ---  
- absorbing & accepting without question and packing it all away,  
and so it accumulates making it harder to identify and focus,  
and separate the stuff of this world, from God's truth & grace.

We can get very, very busy, pre-occupied, overgrown and driven.  
The demands and goals of our lives can become all encompassing,  
that distracts & absorbs our energy, our attention and focus.

In the busyness and matters of our comfort and living in this world,  
we can forget about our spiritual needs, that we do have souls,  
as we relegate our walk with God to the complacent back burner.

Advent is a time to check, and see what's on our back burner.  
To clear away the spiritual obstacles and overgrowth  
any compromises and distractions from faithfulness,  
**to make room, allow and welcome the coming  
of the Lord Jesus to rescue, heal & save us.**

I need for Advent this year, may be even especially this year,  
to be my personal journey and trek out into the wilderness,  
to ask and explore, to learn and experience afresh  
the joy, peace, presence and promises of the Lord,  
and move closer toward becoming the person  
God intended me to be in the first place.

Don't we all need to seek God's wisdom, truth and presence,  
and help us recognize the things that do really matter,  
and separate it from all the rest that really does not?

As we pass through our wilderness of preparation during Advent,  
surely it's an ideal opportunity for us to examine ourselves,  
our lives, our attitudes, our values and hopes,  
and especially, our present walk with our God...  
...for here during Advent we can be honest and authentic,  
as by the grace and peace and presence of the Spirit,  
**we can fall in love with our Lord all over again.**

As Jesus promised us,

I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Jn. 10:10, Mat. 7:8)