

## Order of Worship for December 9, 2023

### Prelude:

P: The Lord be with you.

**C: And also with you.**

**Opening Hymn:** “*Comfort, Comfort Ye, My People*” – Hymn #347

**Confession and Forgiveness:** page 151

### **Service of the Word**

#### **Entrance Psalm:**

P: Restore us, O God;

**C: let your face shine, that we may be saved!**

P: Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock!

**C: You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.**

P: You brought a vine out of Egypt;

**C: it took deep root and filled the land.**

P: Restore us, O God of hosts;

**C: let your face shine, that we may be saved!**

**All: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

P: Restore us, O God;

**C: let your face shine, that we may be saved!**

P: The Lord be with you.

**C: And also with you.**

#### **Prayer of the Day:**

P: Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

**C: Amen.**

#### **Old Testament Lesson:** Isaiah 40:1-11

P: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "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. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All

flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely, the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

P: This the Word of our Lord.

**C: Thanks be to God.**

### **Epistle Lesson: 2 Peter 3:8-14**

P: But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.

P: This is the Word of our Lord.

**C: Thanks be to God.**

### **The Holy Gospel: Mark 1:1-8**

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark, the first chapter.

**C: Glory to You, O Lord.**

P: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,'" John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

P: This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**C: Praise to You, O Christ.**

### **Apostle's Creed:**

## **Sermon Hymn: “Prepare the Royal Highway” – Hymn #343**

### **Sermon: “Way Prepared” – Isaiah 40:1-11**

The saying goes that there are only two seasons: winter and construction. Here in Ames, though, it seems like there is just construction season. The intersection of Lincoln Way and Duff was closed all week, creating traffic jams and delays. Work further down Duff has created problems for businesses trying to attract customers for the holiday shopping season. It seems like the construction on Grand will never end. Work on I 35 between Ames and Des Moines will continue as they work to widen the interstate, and work on 30 east of Nevada is ongoing too.

The problem is that the work is necessary, even with all of the problems and inconveniences it causes us. Some of the work is to improve the infrastructure underneath the road, the pipes and wires and cables that connect us and make things work that we take for granted. Some is to widen roads, so that more people can get to and from places as Ames and the Des Moines suburbs continue to grow. Some are to improve safety, allowing easier turns and making sure traffic flows well.

We hear about road work and highway construction in the Scripture reading from Isaiah 40 for this evening. But the building project Isaiah speaks of isn't for commuter traffic, but for the Lord God himself. In the ancient world, special roads would be constructed in advance of a visiting ruler, built especially for that visit. This would literally be “the king's highway.” The king's highway would also support military supply lines and troop deployment, as well as trade, commerce, and communications. Like any good engineering project, builders would seek to make the king's highway a raised and level surface that would facilitate travel as quickly and efficiently as possible. Hence, “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” (Isaiah 40:4). One such King's Highway ran from Egypt to Damascus.

The background is that Isaiah's speaking to the people of Israel in exile. After decades of prophet after prophet from God warning the Israelites that if they didn't shape up and start following God's laws, something bad would happen, God had finally allowed the Babylonian empire to invade. The chosen people had been captured and taken away into exile in Babylon, hundreds of miles from home. Eventually they repented; they cried out to God, and after about seventy years in exile, God decides they've been punished enough.

And so here comes Isaiah, with some good news for the exiles. In Isaiah chapter 40, he says basically “Get ready! God is coming to rescue you. Prepare the way for God to come. And God's not coming the long way, wandering around through the wilderness and detouring around the desert.

No, God's coming straight across the desert for you, running over any obstacles. There's going to be a straight highway through the desert. Hills and mountains are all going to be flattened out; God's on the way. And God's going to lead you straight back home. The time of exile is over. God's coming to rescue you, so get ready to head out!"

One of the great stories of civil engineering is the construction of the first transcontinental railroad. The Central Pacific Railroad Company of California (CPRR) constructed 690 miles (1,110 km) east from Sacramento to Promontory Summit, Utah Territory. The Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) built 1,085 miles (1,746 km) from Council Bluffs to Promontory Summit, Utah Territory. Why the difference? The Central Pacific Railroad had to go deal with mountains, especially over the rugged 7,000-foot (2,100 m) Sierra Nevada Mountains at Donner Pass into the new state of Nevada. The elevation change from Sacramento to Donner Summit was about 7000 feet and had to be accomplished in about 90 miles. Tunnels and bridges needed to be built, as well. It was a massive project that took a lot of time and a lot of people.

Let's remember that the valleys, mountains, hills, the ground itself – all of it belongs to the King of kings already. After all, He's the One who made it. The word of the Lord through Isaiah finds its fulfillment first in the road God made for the exiles to return home. The path from Babylon to Jerusalem wasn't made by human effort, but by God working to restore and rescue his people, fulfilling his promises to bring them home.

The word of the Lord through Isaiah finds its fulfillment also in the ministry of John the Baptist, the one called by God to "prepare the way of the Lord, [and] make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3). The work of preparation is not some topographical feat of engineering out there somewhere; rather the real work of preparation before the coming of the Lord is in here – within our hearts. That's where the valleys of despair and hopelessness are found. That's where the mountains of human pride and arrogance are located. It is within our own hearts that the uneven ground of shifting priorities and immature, undeveloped faith reside. In the wilderness of our hearts are the rough places of careless, hurtful words and selfish deeds that shut out the light of love. It's going to take a whole lot more than the Army Corps of Engineers to straighten this mess out! It's going to take the Lord God himself.

And that's what happened. John's words were valley-filling and way-straightening. But he wasn't the Christ. He wasn't the one who could do all of those things. His voice would be silenced. But John prepared the way for the Christ, Jesus, the Messiah. He prepared the way for God's motor grader, excavator, and asphalt paver. He prepared the way for Jesus to come. And Jesus came to clear the way for us, the way to God that was blocked by sin. He raised the valleys and lowered the mountains, cleared the obstacles and made a straight path. Because Jesus came, we have a way to God.

Preparing the way of the Lord is what we're called to do, but we can't do it alone. Our own efforts aren't up to the task. But thanks be to God that He cleared the way to us, so we can go to him.

In the times when life feels painful or overwhelming, maybe especially in the times when we look but can't see any signs that God is still active, in the seasons when there's just cones sitting on the road for months and no sign of any actual progress getting made, hold on to the promise in Philippians: "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

God's timing often doesn't follow our plans, but it always works out — sometimes just on an eternal scale. God's road construction project won't run out of budget. It won't stop half-completed for the winter without the promise that it will resume in the spring. "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

So, beloved of God, during this season of waiting and at all times, hold on to the promise. **God is on the way. Prepare the way of the Lord.**

**Prayer:**

P: Lord, so often our religion is a matter of habit and not an affair of the heart. We know the right words, but our hearts are empty. Forgive us, Lord.

**C: We say we are Christians, yet we refuse to allow You into our lives. We call ourselves Christians, but we refuse to speak Your name to others. Forgive us, Lord.**

P: Lord, we complain when living in faith means struggling against self. We mean to accomplish great things, but we often get nothing done.

**C: Awaken us, Lord, with the sound of singing, with the choirs of angels, with the voice of promise, with the triumph of promise fulfilled.**

P: Help us see how Christmas could come so quietly, so humbly, so unassumingly, in such a strange place, among such peculiar people.

**C: Nazareth was a "no-place" town in a "no-where" country filled with "know-nothing" people—people like us. Yet, You bless the ordinary with Your extraordinary gifts. Bless us, Lord, ordinary as we are.**

P: If we cannot be like those who heard the angels the first Christmas, grant that we may join the company of all Your holy ones to see the heavens open, the angels descend, and the Lord revealed in all His glory.

**C: Fill us with a new song, with choruses of "alleluia," with hymns of praise and shouts of salvation, The Lord has done what He said He would do.**

P: Make us willing evangelists like Andrew who told his brother Peter about Jesus, proud proclaimers like Peter, sincere questioners like Nathaniel, devoted friends like Philip. Help us to find You amidst the clutter of our lives, and bless us and those for whom we pray . . .

**C: And grant us Your peace. Amen.**

## Service of the Sacrament

P: The Lord be with you.

**C: And also with you.**

P: Lift up your hearts.

**C: We lift them up to the Lord.**

P: Let us give thanks to the Lord, our God.

**C: It is good and proper so to do.**

### **Words of Our Lord:**

### **Lord's Prayer:**

P: The peace of the Lord be with you always.

**C: Amen.**

### **Distribution of Holy Communion:**

### **Dismissal:**

### **Closing Prayer:**

P: Prepare our hearts, Lord Jesus; turn not from us aside, and help us to receive You this blessed Adventtide. From stall and manger low come now to dwell within us. We'll sing Your praises gladly and forth Your glory show.

**C: Amen**

### **Blessing: (Pastor)**

**C: Amen.**

### **Closing Hymn: "The Advent of Our King" – Hymn #331**

### **Postlude:**