

The 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.

David Beagley

Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, IA Advent 2B December 9, 2023