

Advent 2, Year B—Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8
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All Saints' Episcopal Church
Teri Daily

I love to have people over to our home. But I've learned that no matter how prepared I think I am to have guests, more likely than not something unforeseen is going to happen. One night we hosted a small, elegant dinner for an international visiting professor. All was going well until I went back into the kitchen to make the final preparations for dessert. I confess that this was the only course of the meal that I had not made myself. I took the plastic covering off the store-bought dessert, I laid it on a stove burner that I had forgotten to turn off, and it caught fire – *really* caught fire. I successfully put out the fire, but not until a strong chemical smell filled the whole house. Despite opening the windows and doors, our honored guest was convinced that he was being poisoned by toxic chemicals. It took a little time to get him to come back inside. So here's the bottom line: I've learned that no matter how prepared I think I am, a visit to our home will only be "perfect" if our guests bring a ready-made supply of grace with them when they come.

I especially expect this to be the case if the guest I'm preparing for is God. Maybe that's why I'm captured by the voice that we hear about in today's passages from Isaiah and Mark, the voice crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord." Isaiah goes on to say: "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low." This passage comes from what is known as Second Isaiah and is believed to have been written to the Israelites living in exile in Babylon. It is a promise that God will come and save Israel, that God will "feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom." By using this passage from Isaiah, Mark is reminding his generation that God's same promise of salvation holds for them, too. Just as it does for us today.

But the question I keep coming back to is this: How do we actually prepare a highway for God? How do we prepare a pathway for God to come to us? Do we have to make things level before God can travel the distance? I hope not, because the tough terrain, the high mountain passes and the deep gorges, are exactly what we need God's help to navigate. Ultimately, we *have* to trust in the grace of the one who comes. I think this is precisely what it means to have peace in our heart.

The theme for the first week of Advent is hope, but during the second week of Advent we pray for peace. Peace is not an easy thing to define.

Alfred North Whitehead is a late philosopher whose concept of peace I find very helpful. For Whitehead, peace involves the recognition that there is a distance, a gap, between God's dreams for the world and the way things are – a lack of correspondence between the Ideal and our Reality. We need to acknowledge this gap, because we don't find true peace by failing to see all the tragedy that exists (a condition Whitehead calls anesthesia). And we don't find true

peace by becoming resigned to this gap either, by deciding that things are hopeless and any effort on our part to try to change them would be futile. Instead, true peace comes with the recognition that the gap between the Ideal and our Reality, the way things are meant to be and the way things are, can only be completely overcome in God – it is God who paves the road between the two. In the meantime, the knowledge that things are not the way God intends them to be points us to the way things *could* be; it gives us purpose, directs our actions, and drives us to continue to work for that day when God will be all in all.

This is why our waiting during Advent is not passive. We don't throw up our hands and do nothing until God comes to right the wrongs in the world. But we also don't take the burden all on ourselves, thinking that all hope begins and ends with us. Instead, we recognize that our salvation involves the paradoxical combination of grace *and* works. In other words, as we read in today's passage from 2 Peter, we both wait for and hasten the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

In Killian Noe's book *Finding Our Way Home*, she retells a story originally told by a Cistercian monk residing at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado:

I saw a monk working alone in the vegetable garden. I squatted down beside him and said, "Brother, what is your dream?" He just looked straight at me. What a beautiful face he had.

"I would like to become a monk," he answered. "But brother, you are a monk, aren't you?" "I've been here for 25 years, but I still carry my gun." He drew a revolver from the holster under his robe. It looked so strange, a monk carrying a gun.

"And they won't – are you saying they won't let you become a monk until you give up your gun?" "No, it's not that. Most of them don't even know I have it, but I know." "Well then, why don't you give it up?" "I guess because I've had it so long. I've been hurt a lot, and I've hurt a lot of others. I don't think I could be comfortable without this gun." "But you seem pretty uncomfortable with it. "Yes, pretty uncomfortable, but I have my dream."

"Why don't you give me the gun? I whispered. I was beginning to tremble. He did, he gave it to me. His tears ran down to the ground, and then he embraced me.

Noe adds: "This readiness to let go, to surrender to that voice which is deeper than all other voices within us, may involve years of seeking and preparation and pain. When it comes, it is always sheer gift."¹

This is the waiting of Advent; this is Peace. We work and give ourselves to make the kingdom of heaven a reality on earth, knowing that at the end of the day our salvation always comes from

¹ Killian Noe, *Finding Our Way Home: Addictions and Divine Love* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2004) 11-12.

outside ourselves. It is always a gift – pure grace. This tension of Advent – the tension between grace and works – is reflected in the words of Karl Barth, who said that “the Church, both hurrying and waiting, goes to meet the coming of the Lord.”²

² Karl Barth, “The Church: Its Unity, Holiness and Universality,” *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Bros. Publishers, 1959) 148.