

## **Advent 2: Sunday, December 4, 2011**

*Awesome Deeds We Do Not Expect: Changing the Landscape*

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, **Isaiah 40:1-11**, **Mark 1:1-8**, 2 Peter 3:8-15a

There is a lot of construction going on in our Advent texts today

- not the building of Towers of Babel, nor the erection of multi-million dollar church buildings
- but road construction – and the kind of road construction that is not supported by economic stimulus bills.

The kind of road construction being talked about here is **the roadway into our lives, a road that gives God access to us, to transform us, open our hearts and minds . . .**

- are we willing to be worked on
- are we willing to have mountains broken down in our lives, valleys filled in, barriers removed
- **so that Jesus Christ has free access into our lives, the center of our lives?**

In the midst of voices in our culture,

- voices that seek to keep us in exile,
- voices from the media, global empires, corporations, advertisers,
- voices seeking to sell us the latest building projects for our lives,
- **we are challenged by the prophet Isaiah, and John the Baptist, to clear the landscape of our lives so that God might have open and unimpeded access into our lives.**

As I listen to numerous conversations people have about God, about Jesus being part of their lives, conversations about commitment, conversations about living for God, **I do not hear so much people not wanting God to be a part of their lives**, but rather, **we do not want God to change or mess around with the landscape of our lives**

- we want God to figure out how to navigate our lives, and to bless us, while we remain the same.

We are open, we even want, for God to clear the pathways in front of us, so that we might experience joy and blessing more and more

**But that is not what Isaiah and John the Baptist are saying as their voices cry out to us in our wilderness.**

This roadway they are crying out about, is not about the roadways we want God to clear for us.

This roadway they are shouting about, is not a return from exile, from being strangers, foreigners, aliens, being marginalized in the land.

This roadway is not about finding a path to get rid of the difficulties and struggles in our lives.

**This roadway is a roadway that does not take us anywhere!**

- it is not a roadway to Jerusalem, not a roadway to success, not a roadway to inner peace;

**It is a roadway that does not lead us anywhere!**

**So what kind of road is it that Isaiah and John are crying out about as they raise their voices in the wilderness?**

Listen to what they proclaim:

“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him”

So, what kind of roadway are they talking about?

Yes, it is a road in the wilderness.

Wilderness is a metaphor for our lives desolate from the presence of God

– wilderness describes our lives;

**Could it be a road within our wilderness?**

Could it be a road for Yahweh, for our God, for Jesus our Lord?

**A road for God to travel upon, so that God has unimpeded access into our lives.**

And so we hear Isaiah,

We hear John the Baptist,

We hear the Spirit of God:

**We are to prepare a way for the Lord into our lives**

To make straight paths **into our lives, not for our lives**; because God desires to get into the center of the people of God, into the center of our lives, into the center of our community – for us to be part of what God is doing, not for God to be part of what we want to do.

**This is to be a roadway for God to enter into the midst of our lives**, to be with us in the midst of all the brokenness of life

– it is not about our finding a roadway for us to escape the world, escape from others who are struggling, trying to figure life out,

As we listen to John, we hear that

**God is looking for an open roadway into our lives** – so that God can be in relationship with us and we with God.

You and I have both experienced trying to develop friendships or relationships with others – when they erect barriers, hindering our access to their lives, keeping parts of themselves hidden.

That kind of relationship is work, and has little likelihood of developing, unless barriers come down or are removed.

The same with God entering our lives. God desires more a relationship with us, than we do with God – so we are apt to leave barriers in place, leave conditions for God’s access into our lives in place; God’s access to us has to be on our terms.

But if we want God to recreate us, to shape our lives, our attitudes, our habits, even, who we are, then risk clearing the road, leveling mountains, filling in valleys, so that God can have unimpeded access to our hearts, our minds – to transform us, to fill us with God’s Spirit, so that we might live like we never have lived before.

Let us remove barriers to God entering into our lives, so God is able to be in relationship with us and we with God;

God wants to enter deep within our lives, because we are to be a sign in the midst of a broken world revealing the healing and hope-filled presence of God for all to see, to experience.

This roadway John the Baptist and Isaiah reveal is about showing a new way to live, a different reality of being human in a broken and lost world – because God through Jesus Christ has entered into our hearts, minds, and lives – opening a roadway to God is how we enter into God’s kingdom.

**That is what the image of being baptized, not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit, that John talks about when he talks about Jesus’ coming.**

**When Jesus has entrance into our lives we are baptized in the Spirit**

Matthew says it a little differently than Mark. Mark says Jesus will come baptizing “with the Spirit,” whereas Matthew says “the Spirit and with fire.”

I discovered how powerful an image this is in talking with Jim Hamrick, who used to be a blacksmith.

Working with metal on a forge takes a lot of skill, it knows knowing the fire, knowing the metal, knowing one’s tools, knowing one’s ability.

The fire/coals have to be hot enough, and the blacksmith skilled enough to know the right moment for joining or shaping the metal.

Metal is not joined together by mere force, hammering down on it, but as it approaches a molten state –  
– when the heat from the hearth is just hot enough  
– but not too hot so that the metal burns in the fire.

The image of being baptized with the Spirit and fire has often been interpreted as being judged by the Spirit, a being “burned up” in the fire of the Spirit

– but I do not think that this is what is meant.

Being open to God entering our lives, is to be open to the Spirit, is to be open to be baptized in fire  
– to be brought to a molten state in our lives, where our lives can be joined with the life and presence of God.

It is an image of being brought into community with God in the midst of our struggles, rather than an image of being cast out from God’s presence, of being judged and burned up by God’s wrath.

We might think that struggles, pain and hardship are indicators of God’s being displeased with us or simply does not care about us, BUT

– this image of being baptized with the Spirit becomes a word of hope,  
– that in times of hardship we have opportunity to be more strongly connected to Jesus, with Jesus, with the Spirit, with God.

**So what does the roadway for God into our lives look like?**

As our lives are heated up by the trials, difficulties, and brokenness of life,

Do we allow a roadway into our lives to be constructed,

For God to enter into our lives unimpeded, making the path straight,

Allowing the Spirit to remove the barriers we erect, bringing down the mountains, filling in the valleys,

So that we can be bonded to God, joined together with God, even more strongly,

Being brought into God's community, as people of God's reign

– to become tempered metal, a new kind of metal, a new kind of people who approach and live life in harmony with God?

If we think that the Christian life is meant to be an escape, we are not thinking about participating with God in God's mission of reconciling all humanity to God and to one another, or the re-creation of the earth.

I discover something really cool about God in seeing that God desires to have unimpeded access into my life

– God is interested in living through a people, through me, through us

**– who are not escaping, but are living in a very different way in a broken and hurting world and are entering into our world very differently!**

And when we cry out, “how long do we have to live being tempered with you in the midst of the struggles of this world,” we hear Peter comforting us with these words:

“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.”

As we are not “burned up” by the struggles of life, but joined to God, bonded to God, as God has more and more barrier-free access to our lives,

**May** we also long for others to see God, to become bonded to God in the midst of their struggles, so that none might perish.

– Let us be **instruments of God's patience** so that all may be reconciled to God and recreated to a newness in being human through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

So hear the Word of God:

Prepare a highway for our God in the midst of our wilderness.

Remove the barriers.

Give free access to God in your life for God to do through you what God chooses to do!