

# Advent's Action Plan 2: *Prepare the Way!*

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December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.<sup>2</sup>Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. <sup>3</sup>The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. <sup>4</sup>Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged! <sup>5</sup>Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. <sup>6</sup>From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil. <sup>7</sup>Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. <sup>8</sup>And daughter Zion is

left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. <sup>9</sup>If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah. <sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! <sup>11</sup>What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

Mark 1:1-8

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; <sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” <sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Here he comes again, John the Baptist in his smelly 800-year-old Elijah costume, preaching about repentance with all the fervor of a crazed street preacher, shouting *Prepare the way of the Lord!* Year after year, we cannot get to Christmas without going past him, without getting a whiff of him, without wrestling with why we have to deal with him before we can take that precious baby into our hearts and behold God in Jesus' infant face. The gospel writer Mark doesn't even nod toward Jesus' birth. Mark has no interest in a pregnant Mary or Joseph's predicament, or mysterious angels or traveling Magi. We will get to all of those in due time, but right now we have to consider Mark's call to action. Mark charges right into a grownup gospel with this proclamation: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ," and introduces us to John.

Then John issues the call. Repent – turn toward God, who alone can forgive you, can wipe the slate clean, and send you on your way renewed to join in the good work of the gospel. That is how we prepare for God's coming. Turn from the selfish, greedy, inconsiderate ways of the world and head down the path God has placed before us in the footsteps of Jesus. Something decisive is underway, and John is the one who heralds it, calling to mind the prophets of old and how they came broadcasting the news. Like his forebear, the prophet Isaiah, John proclaimed good news after a long season of bad news.

The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah, before we get to our reading for today, is mostly bad news, words filled with judgment, telling of God's wrath, announcing war and destruction; warn people to straighten up. Our reading from Isaiah 40 changes from the bad into a proclamation of good news. Between the last verse of Chapter 39 and the first verse of Isaiah 40, 200 years have passed, 200 years of Babylonian exile. The ancient covenant community of God's people had been taken away from their land as hostages and had lived as refugees for two centuries. For ten generations they were captives in Babylon, living like the poorest of migrant workers with no memory of a good life back home, save the stories they told to keep their faith alive, stories of Abraham and Sarah,

of blessing and promise, the kind of stories that help people have hope in the worst of circumstances.

So, when Isaiah finally says, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God,” these words come down from heaven like gentle rain on parched souls dying for the intervention of God. The prophet says: In the wilderness of your exile, now is the time to prepare the way of the Lord. After 200 years, God is coming to lead you home, to restore your city, and your life under the peaceful reign of God’s care. Isaiah brings very good news indeed. Isaiah brings peace. Isaiah proclaims the salvation of God has come, and all people will see it together.

It is no wonder that centuries later - during his time of military occupation under the boot of Rome and the empire’s cruel oppression – that John the Baptist arrives quoting Isaiah. He sounds a little fanatic, he dresses kind of crazy, but he too brings unbelievably good news. He proclaims God’s salvation is near. And with God’s salvation comes peace. Prepare the way now, John says calling us to action - turn away from the warring, selfish, power-hungry, violent ways of the world, and live toward God’s peace which is just over the horizon. Both Isaiah and John call us to this good news.

When Kirby Lawrence Hill and I were at Union seminary in Richmond there was an ever-present prophet of sorts named Miss Lily Wilson. She was a fixture on the campus and spent hours a day in the seminary library. She was from a prominent family, and had a nice townhouse in the Fan District of Richmond, but Miss Lily looked more like a homeless person, stooped over, carrying a big satchel of papers, missing a few front teeth. She heard voices in her head, and talked to herself and clearly suffered a mental health complication. The story was, a brilliant intellect, she went to Europe as a young woman to study music; and came home unexpectedly with mental illness. And yet, through the veil of her peculiarity, a penetrating light of Christian witness shone.

Her maternal grandfather was a governor of Virginia which she claimed entitled her to a privileged hearing among all elected officials. She knew most members of Congress and what they stood for. She communicated with them about her concerns as a tireless advocate for peace. While we were seminary students in the 1980's, she went berserk during the Iran-Contra affair, when the U.S. was found to be trading arms for hostages. Occasionally an FBI agent would show up on campus, having traced one of Miss Lily's calls to Washington from one of the seminary's phones to protest congressional decisions vehemently and to advocate for peace.

When it occurred to me that her story resonated with today's prophetic texts for this sermon, I looked up Lily Wilson's obituary online to make sure I got some of the facts straight. When she died 15 years ago, her family recorded this in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*: Lily was an extremely devout Christian and church volunteer. She admitted having read the Bible four times from cover to cover. Not infrequently, she followed the biblical practice of fasting. A considerable portion of her life was spent at Union Theological Seminary, her obituary said, where she hoped to influence young theological students.

I suppose I fell under her spell as I still treasure a small pocket Bible she gave me the day I graduated from Union. In the front pages in her wild handwriting she wrote my name and the note that it was given to the glory of God and in loving memory of Governor J. Hodge Tyler and Family of Virginia. On the Bible's title page in the white space, she copied the Beatitudes - I imagine to remind this young seminary graduate what ministry is all about. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth...* And in handwriting larger than the rest: *Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.* For decades, anyone who spent time in Richmond around the seminary had more than a few Miss Lily Wilson stories.

This is the one I hope I will never forget. My friend, Ted Wardlaw, ran into Miss Lily at a Montreat Youth Conference some years ago. Near Asheville, N.C., Montreat is sort of like Chautauqua – a conference and retreat center of the Presbyterian church. Our Bryn Mawr Youth are going to a Youth Conference there this coming summer. Miss Lily had taken the bus down from Richmond to North Carolina, and probably well into her seventies by then, Ted wondered why on earth she was attending the Youth Conference. He told her how good it was to see her and asked how she happened to be there among all those young people, and what she said was this: “I haven’t been to Montreat in many, many years. I was at some conference a very long time ago – and we were all here in the auditorium – and it was terribly hot, and we were going to hear this preacher. I don’t remember who he was or what he said – but when he stood up to preach, someone interrupted him. Someone stepped up to the pulpit and handed him a note. Everyone was quiet for a moment. He read the note. Then he spoke and said to all of us: “I have good news for you. I have just received the word that the War is over, and peace has finally come.” It was August, 1945, on the Pacific front, the end of World War Two.

Miss Lilly went on; Ted remembers her saying: “The world today is such a frightening place and so many terrible things are happening. I thought if I could just get back down here maybe it would happen again. Maybe someone would hand the preacher a note with good news.”<sup>1</sup>

Can’t you just imagine it... Someone walking up these chancel steps and handing me a note, saying: The War in Ukraine is over... The War in Israel and Gaza is over... The 180 million migrants in the world can go home the fighting is over, there’s plenty of food again. In the United States, random street violence and mass shootings on college campuses, at shopping malls, in houses of worship have ceased. Maybe, someone could just hand the preacher a note with good news.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Paul Hooker of my old Atlanta lectionary group for reminding us of this story of Ted Wardlaw’s about Lilly Wilson.

But that, my friends, is what we have already received, this very day. Here it is -- This is our note: In our violent and frightened world, during a season of economic uncertainty, during a time when public discourse is filled with hatred, political rancor and increasing toxicity, along with the personal turmoil and concerns we carry silently in our hearts: Someone has handed the preacher a note this morning that says, *Comfort, O comfort my people... A voice cries out: In the wilderness of our lives prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

And quoting that very old script, the gospel writer Mark says: *This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* The old prophetic promises have come true in him. All we are called to do is prepare the way. God's ways are the ways of repentance: Turn away from your worldly preoccupations; turn to God's way. Repentance leads to forgiveness: Forgive one another as God has forgiven you. Forgiveness is the way of peace: Prepare for God's coming by making peace. In everything you say and do, make peace. The word handed to us this day is good news, very good news. It is our calling to receive it and prepare the way.

Amen.