

Prepare the Way of the Lord

A Christmas preparation sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, December 6th, 2009

In the prophecy of Isaiah we read,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low;
The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth;
The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’” (40:3-5)

One of the things we’ll observe in next week’s sermon is that an awful lot of what was predicted about the Lord’s coming did not occur in a literal, physical sense. And this, of course, is one of the reasons many Jewish people – and no doubt others – still do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. But the fact of the matter is that despite the true historical features of the Word its real purpose is to teach by metaphors and symbols and what we call “correspondences.” It’s almost inescapable. Just to give one example, the prophets frequently describe Israel as a woman or a wife betrothed to the Lord and then go on to condemn her unfaithfulness – or to predict her restoration, blessing and peace.

This prophecy in Isaiah, chapter 40, has elements of that very thing, as Jerusalem is likened to a woman, and it is said, “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned,” and so on.

And so we come to the words of our text, “the voice of one crying *in the wilderness*....” Is this really a reference to some physical wilderness, or is it the wilderness of those who are lost and confused, lacking the goodness and truth that only the Lord can provide?

Yes, perhaps it is both, as the prophets, especially Isaiah, were noted for wandering throughout the land, which included many wilderness areas, often appearing unexpectedly to declare their warnings and judgments. But the real point here is that Isaiah was speaking in a *spiritual* wilderness to people who did not have the wisdom to be truly fruitful or spiritually prosperous. Indeed, he had just finished speaking with King Hezekiah, who had revealed his ignorance by exposing all the wealth of Jerusalem to a delegation visiting from Babylon (Isa. 39).

So we may see the symbolism throughout the prophecy, and apply it to ourselves as we begin our celebrations of the Lord’s birth into the world.

The first sentence is, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The “way” in Scripture is a road, but it is also a universal symbol for our “way of life.” And this for the most part is dictated by our understanding of what is true or necessary to get what we want. So in the spiritual sense it refers to the doctrine or understanding of truth. It is the intellectual means by which we get from here to there; it is the basis of the old saying “where there’s a will there’s a way.”

So how do we “prepare the way of the Lord”? Well, first of all, let’s be clear about “the Lord:” in this reference, as throughout the Old Testament, this title refers to the Hebrew JHWH, or Jehovah, which is a name so holy the Jewish people would not dare to pronounce it. But the teachings for the New Church tell us that it refers especially to the Divine love, or the goodness of His love. And how do we prepare to receive the truth that leads to Divine love? That is explained in the next lines of the prophecy, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

There’s no mystery about the word, “straight.” Even in an ordinary dictionary it means, or can mean, “honest,” “candid” or “direct.” In the original Hebrew and Greek of the Word it clearly means “upright” or “correct.” Of course it can just mean *physically not crooked*, but even then the spiritual sense of it is right there, too. An old saying reminds us that “streams, like people, become crooked by following the path of least resistance.” We also talk about former criminals “going straight.”

The point is that even in our wilderness or desert-like states, or perhaps especially because of them, we are instructed to make a commitment to the truth and live according to it. We may not feel very enlightened or happy about this; we may not *like* this process or feel very fulfilled by it in the beginning, after all a wilderness or desert represents a state of temptation which typically involves doubt, grief and struggle due to a lack of real love and faith. But whether our faith is strong or weak we can commit our ways to the Lord and trust in Him, as the Psalmist said, to bring good things to pass (Ps. 37:5). Whether we *feel* the joy of His salvation or not we can act according to conscience based on the knowledge we do have and compel ourselves to an honest, upright life for His sake, praying for His help.

In this connection the difference between “preparing the way of the Lord” and “making straight a highway for our God” is significant. In the first case we are getting ready, and that naturally involves planning – thinking about it, getting our heads around it, understanding what we need to do (like it or not). But in the second case we are doing it, actually conducting ourselves in an upright manner, earnestly learning and speaking the truth, being fair and open, making amends where necessary, and so on. Literally the highway is not just a path but a banked up road, raised above the surrounding terrain and well developed as a major artery. Symbolically, then, it is the result of conscientious, daily work to provide for the reception of Divine Truth through study, reflection and the hard work of personal discipline.

So in the prophecy we read, “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth.”

Could the imagery be any plainer? Valleys are depressed places in the earth corresponding to the depressed states in our lives or, in spiritual terms, the low points of our experience when we are caught up in external, natural, worldly or material things rather than the spiritual things that provide for true blessing and peace. They can also represent the states of humility in which we recognize our need so that we are receptive of the Lord’s teaching. Mountains and hills, on the other hand, being elevated places on the earth, correspond to elevated states of love, either good or bad. Here as obstacles to be removed they clearly refer to states of arrogance or pride, the mountains relating to self-love and the hills to the love of the world. But again, the point is, if we live according to the Word these valleys will be exalted, that is, lifted up, and these mountains and hills will be made low. “And the crooked places will be made straight, and the

rough places smooth. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together.”

There is an old Zen saying, “Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water.” The point is that simple, honest acts of service open the mind to an understanding of the truth, and once we understand then we can appreciate and do the same work with joy and gratitude.

The glory of the Lord is the brilliant light of His truth shining from the pages of His Word so that we can understand it, acknowledge it, accept it and appreciate it. And just as this glory is not a natural thing but spiritual, so the reference to “all flesh” is symbolic, not literally meaning every person on earth but everyone who’s heart is willing, for the term, flesh, in Scripture generally refers to what is living in a person, namely his or her affection or love, in short, whatever is of the will. Of course this could be good or bad – bad when it refers to merely natural or carnal desires, but good, for example, when it refers to the Lord’s flesh, as in the holy supper, His body there representing all the goodness of His love.

In simple terms, then, what the prophecy declares is that when we do the work we will see the Lord – and not before. The reason is because doing the work provides a plane or vessel for His love to flow in and produce a new state of affection, a “new will” in the understanding so that what He teaches not only makes sense to us but really resonates with us and inspires and motivates us. You may recall in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus specifically blessed the pure in heart, for, He said, “they (and not others) shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).

As you know, this is the same thing that John the Baptist taught as *he also* urged people to “prepare the way of the Lord.” Therefore he condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them “a brood of vipers,” and he warned them to “bring forth fruits worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:9). For “even now,” he said, “the axe is laid to the root of the trees... (and) every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:11). We are taught in the Writings that if John had not come to preach repentance no one would have been able to receive the Lord at all, for there would have been no basis to comprehend His teaching, moral and spiritual corruption having become the accepted way of life. Truth is received and nourished in good, just as seeds are received and nourished in the earth, but if the earth is hard or rocky or full of weeds then the seeds cannot grow. Thus John’s first recorded words, and the first words of the Lord’s public ministry were “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

But now back to Isaiah. In verses 6 - 8 of the prophecy we read “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God rises up forever.” What is this about?

Well, in one sense it’s very simple: – compared with the Lord and His infinite Word we really don’t amount to much. All our love (represented by the flesh), all our wisdom (represented by the flower), and all our charity (represented by the grass) is as nothing compared with the Word of God. But now the Word of God has been accommodated to the very lowest sensory level of life, conceived and born into the world in a material body so that so that it – He! – can overcome the limitations of the flesh and provide a way for us to be connected – united – with Him in

Divinely Human terms if we will only live as He directs. The Word, as it says in John, has been made flesh and dwelt among us so that we can behold His glory and follow His lead.

It is, quite frankly, hard for us to grasp how significant this is. But Isaiah speaks of it as “good tidings” worthy of shouting from the mountain top, saying to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” – just as the angel told the shepherds in Luke: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...!” For again, as Isaiah said, “Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young” (Isa. 40:10-11).

What is the Lord’s “arm”? We get a sense of it when we use the word, armaments, for the arm represents and corresponds to the *power* we have through the mind and body operating in the world of natural effects. The “arm of Jehovah” therefore is His own Divine Humanity fighting for us against the influence of all the hells and of course against our own hereditary and acquired evils. His “strong hand” carries the same idea, as does His “shoulder” mentioned in another prophecy where it says the government (of the world) would rest upon it.

But note, the arm the Lord is not given to inflict harm but to “destroy the face of the covering cast over all people and the veil that is spread over all nations” (Isa 25:7), to strengthen and support what is good, to “feed His flock like a shepherd,” to “gather the lambs,” and to gently lead those who are in innocence (Isa. 40:11).

Perhaps one reason we struggle so much to see the power of the Lord’s presence in the world is that we can’t really comprehend the spiritual struggles He endured to subjugate the hells. We see the story His outward life and the more we study it the more we see in it. But the fact that the Lord didn’t really overcome anybody in the natural world, and instead suffered brutal torture at the hands of some, can dull our appreciation of the real work He accomplished in the glorification – the perfection – of His own mind and body, winning the war *within Himself* and thereby completely controlling the influence of the whole world of spirits. And yet THIS is what provides for our salvation. This is what makes possible our spiritual equilibrium and free will no matter what may happen to us in the natural world.

Reflecting, then, on the whole scope of Isaiah’s prophecy – or at least the 11 verses we have reviewed today – we see that like the Lord’s own life they are not just literal predictions about His physical birth in Palestine thousands of years ago, they are words filled with deeply symbolic, spiritual meaning for our lives today, urging and encouraging us to do the things we need to do in order to receive His love and wisdom inwardly, to be nourished by His powerful instruction and guided by His tender mercy – as fully manifested and expressed in the amazing life He gave for us to study and accept, to honor and respect, to worship and obey.

Amen.

Lessons: Malachi 3-4: selections
 Children’s talk on “The Day of His Coming”
 Isaiah 40:1-11
 True Christian Religion 86 & 109: selections