

2024 Advent 2C

Prepare the Way!

It's pretty much the main theme of Advent. Over the course of the three-year cycle of readings for these four weeks of Advent, we hear it *a lot*. I've preached on it a lot. I've talked about how the understanding of the call to "prepare the way" in Isaiah 40 evolves over the generations. It is one of my favorite examples of the ways in which we need to let the Scriptures say new things to us as we experience new circumstances in life. On Wednesday I shared a metaphor I used way back, 24? years ago, when I was writing an essay as part of my ordination process.

I said that we need to think of the Holy Scriptures as vocal cords, through which the breath of the Spirit moves. Sometimes they sing ^{way up here!!!} And sometimes they almost growl _{way down here...} If we are so wedded to them meaning one thing and one thing only (and never taking into account that we are reading a translation of texts that are thousands of years old in other languages) then we miss the opportunity to hear God's new song, in a key and tempo that will inspire us today.

We need to listen for what kind of a journey God is calling us to, before we know how to prepare. Will we need our spiritual warm clothes and snowshoes to cut a

path for others through snow? Or will we need to dress our souls for warm, wet, mosquito-infested swamps? Is God calling us to follow a star? Or to leave in the night to protect that which is newborn in us?

What do we need to carry with us? And what do we need to leave behind?

There is a scene in the book *The Return of the King* (I think it's in the movie, too, but I'm not sure) when Sam realizes that he no longer needs the cooking implements he's been carrying, and sets them aside out of his pack. He is a little emotional about it, partially because he had become used to their weight, because they represented part of "home" for him, and partially because in deciding to leave them he is acknowledging there is nothing left to eat. It seems he has given up all hope. He seems to resign himself to a death in a place that is not only very far away from the green hills of his home, but also ugly and lifeless and cruel.

But then...later, when against all odds they are home again, we discover that even as he left everything else behind, he had held onto a little box of soil given to him given to him by Galadriel, who had infused that soil with the power to heal the very earth. I suspect most people reading it for the first time did the same thing I did, and forgot about it, or assumed he had left it behind with everything else.

We discover that even in his deepest despair, some part of him still held out hope, still believed in the possibility that he would have a use for that little box of soil. That somewhere, somehow, some power for good was preparing a way.

This call to prepare a way is a little ambiguous as it moves through the Scriptures. At first it seems that God is promising to be the Way-Maker. Many of you have heard me say “God makes a way where there is no way.” It’s one of the promises of God on which I stand. We have to trust God to be out ahead of us, breaking down barriers, filling in holes, clearing hazards we would otherwise be unable to overcome.

But at the same time, we are being told to be Way-Makers. To participate in this work of redemption that God has begun.

How we do that depends in part on which song we hear God singing. For some, it will be a lament, naming the ways in which things in this world are not as they should be. Speaking truth to power.

For others, it will be a rousing marching song, firing us up to challenge the oppressor, to strive for justice and peace for all people.

For still others, they will hear a song of consolation, or healing, something meditative to bring healing and peace.

The job of each is to listen for the tune the Spirit has given to them, and not judge it better or worse than someone else's. To trust that what God has begun in our lives and the lives of others, will be brought to completion...eventually. Maybe not as quickly as we would like, maybe not even in our lifetimes.

But as Paul wrote from prison to his beloved friends in the church in Philippi:

"I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Or put another way—when all the songs of the Spirit come together, we will discover God has been writing a symphony of creation.

(And to those of you who know your Tolkien, yes, that was a reference to the beautiful creation story found in the Silmarillion.)

Amen.