

“Blazing a Trail” – Advent 2 – Isa 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Are you wondering why we are reading a passage about John the Baptizer as we get close to Christmas? Understandably you would likely be expecting one of the delightful warm and fuzzy nativity stories with which we are so familiar – and yet instead here we meet a crusty, cantankerous, not-very-pleasant individual. That may indeed seem a little odd at first but as we dig a bit deeper not only does this choice of a text begin to make sense but also the text itself begins to blend with the Christmas story.

To begin our digging, we first need to understand and acknowledge that Mark’s gospel is the earliest of all four accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke have extended the story to include the early years of Jesus, partly to respond to the inevitable curiosity of people in the early church wondering about Jesus’ origins and family, but also to emphasise that Jesus had not simply burst suddenly upon the scene; to show that he was indeed the fulfillment of prophecy and God’s promises. John continues that movement and pushes Jesus’ origins way, way further back than the Christmas event, connecting Jesus with God right from the very beginning of all things.

Mark seems to assume that his readers will make the connection of Jesus and prophetic fulfillment all by themselves through his use of scriptural references. He provides quotations and echoes from the Jewish Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, and apparently didn’t feel the need to elaborate on either Jesus’ origins or early years. Besides, Mark had what I’m sure he felt was a bigger issue to deal with, namely addressing the ongoing struggle between those who thought that John the Baptizer was the promised Messiah and those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of those promises. Other gospel authors addressed the same issue by recounting that even John needed to send his followers to Jesus for affirmation that Jesus is the one, for which Jesus provided an answer by quoting from scripture – the Book of Isaiah – that “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

However this is not the only time that Jesus appears in the gospels quoting from Isaiah – recall the scene in Luke’s gospel where he reads from that scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth, the verses that begin, “The Spirit of the Lord has come upon me ...” and then infuriates the crowd by telling them, “this day in your presence this scripture has been fulfilled.” The Book of Isaiah seems to have featured prominently both in Jesus’ life and ministry and also in the Christian understanding of his death; for example we tend to hear the “Suffering Servant” passages in Isaiah as referring to Christ, especially in his not answering his accusers and suffering while blameless.

Here in the opening of Mark’s gospel John the Baptizer also quotes from Isaiah, “see, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way...”, helping us to hear the early prophet’s words as referring not to himself but to Jesus.

From our digging two key questions come to mind – well, to my inquiring mind, at least – what exactly is the role that John played in preparing the way, and can we in turn prepare the way also? Let’s take these questions one at a time and see if we can hear and learn. To begin we note that John lived out his call to prepare the way through a ministry of calling people to repent, to turn away from (that’s what the root of ‘repent’ means) their sinful ways, and to be baptized, to undergo a ritual cleansing that would signal their being reconciled with God. Not surprisingly that process closely follows the structure of the Book of Isaiah, a fascinating piece of editorial work that could be described as the most important book in the Old Testament – reason enough to learn more about it.

It has long been recognized that there are at least two and more likely three distinct sections to the Book of Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters are primarily from a prophet who lived and prophesied just prior to the fall of northern Israel to the Assyrians in 721 B.C. That 'first' Isaiah was a contemporary of other prophets with whom we are a bit familiar, namely Amos, Micah, and Hoseah, all of whom shared some common themes and approaches. Those prophets proclaimed God's displeasure with the way that the people of Israel had turned away from his protection and had become deeply entangled in political posturing and even treachery to stave off attacks from predatory neighbours. Those noble prophets did so loudly and directly to religious and political leaders, even or especially to kings, and announced in specific terms the kinds of judgments that the people could expect.

We read the opening words a few minutes ago from the second major section of the Book of Isaiah that begins at Chapter 40. While the specifics are few and not totally self-evident, it is generally taken that these prophetic words were addressed to the exiles in Babylon some 150 years after the events of the first part of the book. As we heard in that opening, the tone and substance of the message in this part of the book are considerably different from the earlier prophet. Contrasted with that previous message of stern retribution, we hear in this section a clear message of reconciliation, of being restored to a right relationship with God. The key message here is one of God's continuing faithfulness and grace coupled with a promise that not only will his people be restored but further that the promise will continue forever. Taken by itself the message of this part could sound a wee bit too much like "don't worry, be happy", but since the positive assurance is inexorably coupled with the earlier message of judgment we hear – like John the Baptizer and Jesus also – the two-part message of judgment and reconciliation tied together.

What then about the third part of the Book of Isaiah, Chapters 56 to the end? There are many different pieces of literature in this section but the overall theme seems to be one of how to respond to the grace of God proclaimed in the second part, primarily through a return to honouring God through integrity of faith and faithful religious observances. This section thus forms a fitting conclusion, adding the essential third leg to the stool, the entire book thus giving us a rounded-out message of judgment, reconciliation, and faithful response.

So, back to that first question ... the issue of preparing the way ... John the Baptizer lays the groundwork for the emergence of Jesus through proclaiming his own message both of judgment of sins and reconciliation available through a faithful response in repentance and baptism. Those who had ears to hear this prophetic message and responded were then prepared for and hovering on the threshold of responding in faith to the Lord Jesus.

Well then, how about the second question, the question of how can we in our faith response prepare the way of the Lord? I believe that while there are perhaps an infinite number of specific ways for us to do so, there are some common themes that can help us get started or continue. While we have already taken that first step of preparation in repenting and responding in being baptized, it's never too late to ask ourselves, "how's that working out for you?" – it's always a good time to check those areas of our lives that might call for a bit more repenting and opening the door to feeling a bit more of the reconciliation that awaits us. Doing so will of course prepare the way for the Lord to enter our lives a bit more.

We can also prepare the way of the Lord by helping others hear the message of reconciliation with God that is available through faith in Christ Jesus. While some feel that that message is best proclaimed through trying to emulate a crusty and cantankerous prophet like John the Baptizer, I believe that the message is more clearly and effectively proclaimed through

the model in the Book of Isaiah and in the teachings and ministry of Jesus. We've looked at the judgment/reconciliation/response model of Isaiah – what then was at the heart of the teachings and ministry of Jesus?

“Peace be with you” was the way in which Jesus greeted the faithful. “Go in peace” he told those whom he had healed. “I have come that you may have life and life abundant” Jesus promised to those who would listen and respond. That ‘other’ John, the Evangelist, declared that Jesus had come not to condemn the world but to bring eternal life. The judgment according to that John was that the light had come into the world but the world had ignored it. The greatest commandment according to Jesus was to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbour as you have been loved – echoing the prophet Micah’s assertion that what God really wants from us is that we love justice and walk humbly with our God, an assertion repeated and expanded upon in Isaiah as well.

And so our preparing the way comes a bit clearer – proclaiming the abundant and eternal life offered in Christ by loving and acting out justice in concrete and loving ways. Those ways, we are told, include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, offering dignity to the oppressed, welcoming the stranger among us. Especially in this Christmas season we do see an abundance of people responding with – although our society is embarrassed to say it – the Christ spirit, and that is heart-warming. Such demonstrations of grace and mercy and ministering are good and welcome; however they are needed and called for not just in this time of tinsel and eggnog but all year long. That’s where our call to prepare the way of the Lord becomes clear ... we are called to prepare a way for the Lord through ministering all year long to those who need shelter, food, peace, and dignity. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God ...”