

“The Long and Winding Road”
November 28, 2021

Isaiah 40:1-11
Luke 3:1-6

As I said during the announcements, because of the furnace repairs and the Thanksgiving holiday, we printed this morning’s bulletin last Tuesday. I didn’t have a sermon title at the time—and, really, I had only the very beginnings of a sermon.

But if you need a title, let’s call this “The Long and Winding Road.”

You see, I got up early on Thanksgiving morning, not to put the turkey in the oven, but to watch the first episode of *Get Back*, the long-anticipated documentary about the Beatles’ final rooftop concert and breakup in early 1969. And what a film! If you are part of my demographic, you’ll want to see this close-up look at the creative process and four of the most famous people of the Twentieth Century coming to the end of, well, a long and winding road.

At one point Paul McCartney sits at that iconic Blüthner piano, working on the words for that song. It is among other things a song about journey and arriving and all things that thwart and block us on our way. McCartney says to Mal Evans, the Beatles’ road manager, that maybe the second verse should be about something “like the weather obstacles,” which, indeed it eventually became. “It’ll be like the thing that’s up ahead,” he says.

Evans, who is always writing down the various versions of song lyrics, suggests: “Like what about the obstacles on the road.”

Sir Paul pauses and then replies: “There’s enough obstacles without putting them in the song.”

Friends sent a Christmas card with the usual printed letter detailing the high points of the past year. It was accompanied by a hand written note that read: “We didn’t include a few rough things happening in our families.”

We don’t have to list all the obstacles, do we? There are enough.

We’ve been traveling this long and winding pandemic road together now for almost two years and the post-Thanksgiving reports about the Omicron variant suggest new obstacles up ahead. At the same time, each of us has known our own difficult paths with our own unique obstacles—too many to be put into the song. Perhaps you are walking such a path today and have come to this place, this time, seeking renewal, seeking comfort.

If so, you have arrived at the right place. This morning we hear God speaking to us through the prophet: “Comfort, O comfort my people.”

Now, when we think of comfort, we often think of feeling good, feeling cozy, feeling at ease. We talk of “comfort food,” of comfortable clothes. It helps us to remember, then, the root of “comfort” in the Latin word *fortis*—strong.

Through the prophet, God offers not so much ease as strength to the weary people in exile. The captives in Babylon were told that they would be set free, that they could return home. The way, however, would not be to travel up the Euphrates River and over the Fertile Crescent back to

Jerusalem, but straight across the wilderness of the desert. This is not the easy way. It is the way that requires all the strength that can be mustered.

So it is for us:

when the grass has withered,

when the flower has faded,

when the trees look dead,

we hear a word that speaks about life.

When memories of the past dare us to continue,

when present burdens seem difficult to bear,

when there seems little hope for the future,

we hear a word that comes not just tenderly, but with fortitude—the word of God calling us forward into the wilderness and, more importantly, *through* the wilderness.

The wilderness can be a place of violence and lawlessness. It is often a cold place, a place of struggle and a place where we find hope against all odds. The wilderness is hunger and homelessness. The wilderness is the fear and grief and anger that dwell in our hearts.

In just such places, this is the work to which we are called: “Make straight a highway. Lift up the valleys. Make the mountains and hills low, the uneven ground level, the rough places a plain.” In such places, for such work we will need strength, we will need to be *comforted*, for we are called to actively bring about the *advent*, the coming of God into the world.

This is the real reason behind some of our beloved traditions during this season: giving to special mission programs such as the Heifer Project, contributing to the Shelter House, and our other giving at this time of year—at the end of a year that has been marked by great disaster and great generosity, by great hope and great fear. All this is done to enable the world to be more like God’s plan for it. We give to provide healing, clothing, food, and shelter. We give as a way of announcing the comfort of God so that all people can hear it.

When we give, when we act out of love, we learn to let go of at least some of what we have so that we can let God work through us in the world. When we give, we prepare the way of God.

If we are fortunate, as we prepare, we begin to recognize the ways in which our own lifestyles contribute to hunger, to poverty, to violence—to the affliction of the world. And we repent—that is, we turn in the opposite direction.

In these days, then, we can give special attention to the way of life we are to live all year long: bringing tidings of comfort to those who dwell in the shadow places of our city and our world. These days, let us still be generous in remembering the poor, the hungry, the homeless.

Listen.

Even now, we hear God’s call to prepare a new road in a world of affliction.

Listen.

In a world of affliction, we will still hear God's word of comfort.

The road we are called to prepare might not be as smooth or as straight as we previously imagined. It might be a road filled with the challenges that make us strong.

I read of a missionary doctor in Malawi who spends a lot of time in an ambulance driving from one hospital to another. One day he navigated the 22 hairpin turns up a mountain to a hospital in Livingstonia. There was an emergency that the hospital couldn't handle. The hospital at the bottom of the mountain would give the patient a better chance. So, the doctor loaded the patient and drove back down the difficult mountain road. He should have been exhausted, but he got to the other hospital on time. Then he turned around and went up the mountain again.

There were no great heroics here—but do you see that wonderful image of what it means to be preparing the way? We face the fact that the mountains and crooked ways are still there—and we work around the obstacles, even if that means negotiating one hairpin curve after another.

This, then, is the Good News: however long and winding the road might be, we are strengthened to prepare the way home.

On this road we let forgiveness replace bitterness and resentment in our hearts so that we may keep moving forward rather than be stuck in the past. We let God redeem past failures so that a new way can be found where once no way at all seemed possible.

On this road our weakness encounters God's strength.

On this road our fear meets God's courage.

God is still with us, comforting us, that we might comfort the world as we travel together on this long and winding road.