

[PRAYER] [BLANK] I am still catching my breath from last week, reflecting on the hundreds of people who came to our church for our Christmas in the Village celebration. Many of them prayed or left prayers, some even prayed on our lawn in front of our Mary and Joseph statues. It was a mild day, so lots of people came to the festival, but I wonder if our board sign, inviting people to celebrate hope, had something to do with it. People want hope, these days. People need hope. People want to find that hope in Jesus. We are here for a reason, not just for a season, and I hope that you felt that in your hearts as you served all of these people seeking Christian hope.

The story of Advent continues this week, as we shift from the coming of Christian hope to the birth of Christian love. [POTTER] With Christian hope, we prepare the way of our Lord by surrendering our will and our lives to be shaped by our God, a God who wants to shape us like a potter shapes clay on a wheel, molding us into something even better. God's hands are hands of love, hands that comfort us with firmness, guiding us to the shape that we're meant to take.

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The people of Israel, in the time when Isaiah 40 was written, needed those firm hands of comfort. More than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, they had been conquered by the Babylonians, who took many of the Israelites to Babylon as captives. There came a time, though, when the prophets of Israel wanted to prepare them to return to their land. There was hope. God still loved them, in spite of all of their wrongdoings. And God's plan for Israel revealed by Isaiah was simple; they should prepare a way for God, their Lord, straight through the desert from Babylon, back to Israel. [DESERT ROAD] And it wouldn't be just a path, wandering here or there, for one, or two, or a few chosen people to come back to Israel. No, Israel's comfort was that God wanted the Israelites to prepare a straight highway, as wide as they could make it. God wanted everyone to come back to God to experience God's comforting love as fast as possible.

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Some did just that. The temple of God in Jerusalem was rebuilt. The faith of Israel returned to their land. But something was missing. It seems that the people of Israel fulfilled only part of Isaiah's prophecy. You see, Israel had not really changed their ways. Most paid God lip service, and kept God far from their hearts. They came to the Temple for the holy festivals to offer God a lamb, or a bird, or some grains, but they weren't ready to trust in God enough to open their hearts to everything that God could do to bring them a better life. Corruption remained a way of life. Cruelty and injustice were everywhere. Empires continued to enslave them. Love did not rule them.

Seven hundred years after these words from Isaiah, little had changed for the people of Israel. I want to say that again - little had changed for the people of God in seven hundred years. Can you imagine that? Sometimes we complain about our circumstances, and hope for something better, but can you imagine a world where the bad things in life just kept getting worse for more centuries than you could dare to count? But still, some people hoped that God's love would favor them again. Something in the words of Isaiah must still be the story of God's love.

This is where the story of Jesus begins. In the middle of hopelessness, in the middle of a foreign empire humiliating and enslaving the people of Israel, in the middle of frustration, and anger, and regrets, and shame, the story of Jesus begins in the gospel of Mark. Imagine, for a moment, that you were one of those people of Israel, or from a nearby country, and you had heard about this amazing man Jesus who had come to Israel. You had heard all sorts of things about Jesus, rumors, things good and bad, amazing and hard to imagine. Someone invites you to hear

Mark's story. You settle down with others to hear this story, not knowing quite what to expect. A disciple of Jesus comes forward, and begins the story: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Amazing, simple words!

I love Mark's gospel, because it is so simple, so powerful, so direct, so straight to the point. First of all, Mark tells us that the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the beginning of God's good news. The story starts by saying that the story of Jesus is not over! It could be seven hundred, a thousand, two thousand years after Mark first wrote those words, and we'd still be part of a story that was just beginning. God's good news of love in Jesus Christ is just warming up, even two thousand years after the story started! And talk about a "spoiler alert" - Mark doesn't play games with people; he tells everyone right way that the story has a good ending, good news that is still being written, even today! God's Son has come to save us, and God still wants to save us! God will never give up on us!

So the story of Jesus is already off to an amazing start. Then Mark switches right away to the next amazing part of the story: it's a story that fulfills the words of the prophets of Israel. Isaiah 40's prophecy has finally come true! John the Baptist, preaching repentance to Israel by the river Jordan, was the promised messenger for God's coming!

So, what was it that the people of Israel had missed in Isaiah's prophecy? What words had been unfulfilled? Mark is giving us the straight story - they had missed who was supposed to do what. You see, Isaiah said that WE are the ones who are to prepare the way of the Lord, WE are the ones who were to bring low the mountains and lift up the valleys. Preparing the way of the Lord meant not just being ready for God to come, but to be ready for God to help us make massive changes in our lives, and in the world. For us to find the love of God in our lives that changes our lives, that brings us from despair to hope, from grief to new life, to find this kind of amazing love in our lives means dedicating ourselves to a life of constant and devoted preparation for God's coming. God's love is free, and the love that we are hoping to find in Jesus Christ this Christmas is the best love of all, the best news of all history. But to have that love become real in our lives means really committing ourselves to Christian renewal.

John the Baptist started people on this path of renewal when he asked the people of Israel seeking God's love to be baptised in the river Jordan. This was not a quick shower, or a ritual bath near a synagogue or temple, a status quo kind of dunking, something that you could order up on Uber or Amazon. No, as early Christians understood it, the waters of the Jordan were deep, cold, dangerous for those not ready to enter them. In other words, John's baptism under the waters of the Jordan invited you to die to your sins in order to find new life. To get the good news of Jesus, you have to let go of the bad news, for good. The mountains of our pride must come tumbling down. The valleys of our despair and shame must be lifted up. And we must tear them down and lift them up together, to build a highway for the world's salvation made of God's love.

That's the straight story of what it means to enter into God's love this Advent. We are in a season of renewal, a season of preparing the way in our hearts for a year in which we can live in the good news of Jesus more than ever before. A child is coming, a child born in a manger, a child who passed through his mother like every other baby in history, into a world filled with the same problems, the same disappointments, the same incompleteness, that we have today, to help the world to be like heaven on earth. We can be like the people of Isaiah's times, and change nothing in ourselves or the world, and pass that baby by, call him just another poor and lost child in a world of lost children. Or, we can finally respond to the call of God's love in our hearts, and prepare the way of the Lord.

Let go of the things that keep you from believing that the good news of Jesus Christ is THE good news for humankind, and all of creation. Prepare the way of the Lord! Let go of waiting for God to change things that God wants US to change through God's grace: prepare the way of the Lord! Let go of thinking that the love that God wants us to feel and to share with the world needs anything less than our complete repentance and our complete devotion to the God who loves us so deeply, so perfectly, through faith in Jesus Christ! Prepare the way of the Lord! Make it wide, make it straight, make it filled with as many people as we can reach through our faithful service to God, so that everyone on earth may leave behind the darkness of sin and death, of oppression and despair, of ignorance and injustice, of everything that would condemn ourselves and the world to needless destruction, and turn to the God of hope, the God of love, the God who is preparing us for everlasting joy and peace, and prepare for this God, our one true and everlasting God, the way of the Lord! Prepare the way of the Lord! Amen!