

“Clear a Path in the Desert”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40

I remember driving in the Netherlands with my daughter Kathryn a few years ago. And where her GPS said in a very British voice to proceed forward towards the next intersection, the intersection was clearly marked with huge signs as a construction zone – signs which had obviously been up for quite a while! You’ve heard stories of people following their GPS only to find the road ends in a lake, or the road is no longer there. We can’t always rely 100% on our GPS to be the reality that we’ll find.

There’s also a sense in our own lives of our own personal GPS as we map out our lives. We’ve all had times of introspection when we evaluate where we are and where we’ve been and what we might want to venture into in the next decade of our lives. And it isn’t always a straight line is it, from where we are to where we think we want to be! Usually, there are many detours and dead ends along the way.

But as a people of faith, we have a far superior GPS in our lives, in our trust in God’s leading. Yes, God accompanies us – as Psalm 23 says – Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me – but God also leads, if we open our hearts to hear the Spirit’s call. Today’s passage from Isaiah however, asks me to reassess just how I’m listening to God’s call. Is my hearing selective? Am I truly open to God’s leading?

Bishop Michael Curry, the leader of the Episcopalian church in the United States, writes, “There will be a time when God’s GPS points you in a direction that makes people uncomfortable.”¹ What happens when God sends us along a path that is uncomfortable? A path which leads us from something we’ve known so well, to something that feels very different, and as Bishop Curry says, uncomfortable.

Isaiah’s text today gives us the beautiful words that many of us recognize from the opening music of Handel’s Messiah. The choir is on stage, the orchestra is seated. Among the 4 soloists sitting in front of the choir, the tenor rises to take his place. He opens his music, lifts up his chin and waits for the orchestra to start. And then on cue, his voice lifts up the words ‘Comfort ye.’ And we know the musical journey has begun. Soon we’ll be following the tenor’s words that also come from this Isaiah text, “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.”

Isaiah 40 signals a new voice from the prophet. Gone are the predictions of doom and death of the previous 39 chapters. Isaiah 40 brings to the people a breath of fresh, invigorating, life-restoring air. These words are offered by the prophet who stands with the people in exile, who now understand that God is making their path home a reality. They will be let go, and will be free to return to Jerusalem. And their path will be made straight. Their path will be freed from

¹ Bishop Michael Curry, *Love is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (New York: Avery, 2020), Chapter 8. (This quote was taken from a discussion on a clergy Facebook community that I’m a part of.)

high hills and deep valleys. Their path will be one of ease and directness and certainty. For God has said so.

I think of Bishop Curry's observation "There will be a time when God's GPS points you in a direction that makes people uncomfortable." There will be some dis-comfort before I get to the comfort part. For the path I see before me needs some serious work. As the Voice translation reads, "A voice is wailing, "In the wilderness, get it ready! Prepare the way; the Eternal would have it so." The way needs levelling. It needs building up. It needs some reconsidering.

Today I'm lifting up the path that the church itself is on. And I'm seeing a fork in the middle of the road just ahead and the church is going to make a choice as to which path to follow. There is the path of the 'institutionalized' church - the church that sits on all the main intersections of cities everywhere, that is known for its worship services, its beautiful sanctuary, its presence throughout generations of faithful followers. This is the church we have all grown up with, and it is a deep part of our faith story.

But here is where the GPS tracker is challenging our comfort zone. For the other path is the path of the 'work of the church', which is different from the path of the 'institutionalized' church. For the institutionalized church only works from within its building, its space, within its four walls. The other path, 'the work of the church' path, leads one not into the building, but to the corners of the community where we never go. And the tracker is leading us there.

From a commentary, "Advent is the season when we remember how Jesus put on flesh and moved *into the neighbourhood*. God getting born in a barn reminds us that God shows up in the most forsaken corners of the earth."² And our GPS coordinates are leading us there. But *against* our instincts. Because, as the commentary continued, "everything in our society teaches us to move *out of* neighbourhoods where there is high crime, to move away from people who don't look like us."³

Yes, as a church we do outreach. We support the Mission and Service Fund of the United Church of Canada as it works with its Canadian and international partners to support and meet needs in the vulnerable in our world. Yes, we support the local Stouffville Food Bank with food and clothing and financial support. Yes, we give to local charities that are there to meet the needs of the hungry, the homeless. But the GPS coordinates that God is giving the church are leading us past the mail box and the e-transfer webpages that we use to give money to a "good cause." And instead, is pushing us out of our comfort zone into work that is asking for more from us than a hand out.

Lilla Watson, an indigenous elder, educator, and activist wrote, "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."⁴ Lilla's use of the word 'liberation' tells me that I need to figure out what I am doing to liberate, not just Lilla, not just me, but the *human condition*, so that every person has the same access to all things that offer a good life.

² Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 48.

³ Common Prayer, 48.

⁴ Behold: Arts for the Church Year, Advent & Christmas 2011, Epiphany 2012, (Logos Productions, 2011), 4-5.

Church vision statements will say, ‘we help the poor’. But we need to start qualifying that, by adding things like - by working with local politicians to build and manage affordable housing, to provide housing and support services for the homeless population, to work towards securing a federal Guaranteed Basic Income for all people. Everything we strive for should help the *least of these* out of the hole they’re in. Everything we strive for should critique hierarchal structures that profit from economic models that advantage the few over the many. Only then, is my liberation bound up with Lilla’s liberation. I can’t meet her half way by saying here’s some food. Loving my neighbour as myself calls me to go the extra distance so that all have the same access to the good things in life. Which includes housing. Which includes income. Which includes access to health care. The work of the church should come from a deep sense of justice, not ‘just-us.’⁵

I’m going to give you an example. This week I listened to a United Church podcast⁶ by Bri-anne Swan, in her role as Minister for Social and Ecological Justice. She was interviewing Rev. Karen Orlandi, minister to Silver Spire United Church in St. Catherines, Ontario. In the town of 130,000 the issue of homelessness is very visible. The church offers Out of the Cold meals, and with the pandemic, they have gone from serving 150 to 300 meals at their Monday night dinner. The numbers have gone up because currently there is no place for people to get warm, to have access to clean water sources, to wash their hands, and to use the washroom.

In discussions with the local council about the city run washrooms, she was told the washrooms are locked every day at 5 pm, and not open on weekends. But, they said, we have put in porta potties. The problem is, they’re not maintained. Not cleaned. Not resupplied with toilet paper. Rev. Karen was told that any one using them has to ‘take the risk’. Rev. Orlandi was so angered by that, she used them herself for a month and then wrote a blog about it. Neighbourhood associations got involved, and an interfaith letter of concern was sent to the City and the councillors. This week, dollars for a self-cleaning washroom were approved at council. Here is an example of the liberation that Lilla speaks to – what works for you should work for me. What standards you live by should be the standards I live by.

Bishop Curry said “There will be a time when God’s GPS points you in a direction that makes people uncomfortable.” God gives to the church this ‘uncomfortable’ ‘work of the church’ – the work of justice, the work of clearing the path so that a time will come when the rough places are smoothed out, when the valleys and the hills are levelled out, so that every one will be able to walk this path, together.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ The comment, “Justice, not Just Us,” was made by Dr. Obery Hendricks Jr, during the 2020 Styberg Preaching Conference, held via zoom on Friday, December 4, 2020.

⁶ Bri-anne Swan. “Do Justice. The podcast. Resistance Church. Episode 4 Preaching the Wilderness,” December 4, 2020.