

St. Andrew's UMC
December 7th, 2008
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
"Prepare the Way of the Lord"

I have a question: does it make much sense to prepare the highway of the Lord in the wilderness, as the Book of Isaiah says? If God is coming, why would God come to the wilderness where there is no one? Then again, the New Testament version does not make much more sense either: if God wanted the people to hear the message, why would the Baptist do the crying way out in the wilderness, where there is no one to hear his voice? It seems indeed futile effort to cry in the wilderness.

But for those of us who live in the modern cosmopolitan area, we know that many highways have been built through the wilderness. We know there are highways that cross the Nevada desert, through the barren Utah, and through the wild, wild Wyoming. These highways lead to somewhere—to CA, actually.

The prophet Isaiah told his generation to build the highway of the Lord in the wilderness, because, it symbolizes the highway that leads to the new beginning.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

The mountains were always mountains, as long as the valleys were always valleys. Well, the nobles were always the masters, as long as slaves were always the slaves. The rich were always rich, as long as the poor were always poor. That was always the way it was, and any one who wanted to change the order of these things either had to do it with violence, or had met the swift retribution. As far as justice and righteousness were concerned, the human civilization has always been the wilderness made up of the mountains and the valleys and crooked roads.

Now that will all change. Those who have exalted themselves by oppressing people will just have to get used to being equal to those

whom they used to trample underfoot. The highway of the Lord is going to lead to the new place where equality and justice rule. There will be hope for the oppressed who endured in the barren wilderness devoid of justice and righteousness.

To this vision of the new hope, the writer of Mark supplies the concrete event to the readers: This is the good news of Jesus Christ, he declared. There was one who did prepare the way of the Lord, and his name was John the Baptist, the messenger from God. And this Lord Jesus came to proclaim the new hope in the kingdom of God. He preached the good news of the kingdom of God.

Now, one thing we need to consider: How did John come to the point where he was convinced beyond the shadow of any doubt that he was *the* messenger whom God promised to send, as prophesied in the Book of Isaiah?

I mean, if he looked up a little, he could have convinced himself to be the very One who was coming. Why did he settle with the lesser character of the prophecy? So many cult leaders today and yesterday all claimed to be the messiah. You do not see guys proclaiming, "I am the voice crying in the wilderness!" You do not hear guys saying, "I am John the Baptist!" Or, "I am prophet Elijah!" You would think there are so many messiah materials just waiting to come forward—not the prophets or baptists—judging from all these dime-a-dozen cult leaders. They all tend to claim to be the messiah. Why is that so?

When God intended to raise the Messiah, God wanted him to be crucified. For some reason, that deadly aspect is conveniently lost on these self-appointed messiahs, and just about every messiah invariably behaves like the alpha male in a mini-harem they managed to assemble. If there is no sexual abuse involved, then it is strictly the matter of who has the monopoly of power.

I guess it is simple, really: given the choice, would Clinton, Bush, and Obama have run for the presidency or the vice presidency? For any given human being, I dare say, it is almost universal that one's natural inborn ambition compels one to be the boss, not the right-hand man, or the followers, or the towel boy. If one shoots for the

second fiddle, the next position in sight will be the first violin. If one shoots for the membership on the board, the next target would be the vice president, then the president, and then finally the CEO. Everyone wants to be the captain of the ship. But you need the boatswain and the deckhands, if you want the ship to sail somewhere.

Given this universal human condition, it is highly puzzling that John would settle for the position that was not even “worthy to stoop down and untie” the dust-caked thong of the stinky sandals of him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. What kind of self-deprecation is that?

If this is the sign of humility, that is such an un-American thing, culturally speaking, to sell oneself short like that. The American culture seems to promote that we put the best foot forward, be aggressive, be ambitious, be confident, and of course, harbor over-blown self-esteem, no matter what the content of the character may be. There had to be a good reason for John the Baptist to self-deprecate, and did not claim to be the Messiah.

Unfortunately, the Bible says nothing about how John the Baptist came to perceive his calling. So let us, for a moment, assume that it is true that John the Baptist had gone through a tough discernment process of what his true calling was. Let us assume that he eventually found out, and was convinced that the particular prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in him, as the writer of Mark had recorded.

What is necessary for John to arrive at that point of discernment was the awareness of one’s own identity. John had to be aware who he was, before he was able to determine what persona to take on, whether it was according to the prophecy, or whether he was driven by his own personal ambition, or whether powered by his own delusion.

John had to be clearly aware who he was and who he was not. By the fact that he did not claim to be the Messiah himself, we can determine that John knew who he was. By the self-deprecating statement that he was not “worthy to stoop down to untie the thong of the sandals,” we can also assess that John knew who he was not.

I am about to pronounce that John has passed the authenticity test. It appeared that John really understood who he was, and who he was not, as far as the grand scheme of the prophecy was concerned. One thing about democracy is that it allows any Tom, Dick, and Harry, and Mary, Jane, and Sally, to become anyone. So, sometimes, we see some one occupying the place he or she should never have, by the authority of campaign advertisements and individual votes.

As for the preparing the way of the Lord is concerned, it is a timeless question for every Christian disciple: What is the nature of God's calling for each one of us? John the Baptist did fulfill his own calling, and did his share of preparing the way of the Lord.

The same applies to each one of us. Each one of us has one's own calling to fulfill, and one's own preparing the way of the Lord to accomplish. The question we must ask is about our own identity: Who am I, and who am I not?

If we are sometimes wondering about the meaning of life, and about why we are born, then trudge through the world of suffering, hopping over the occasional islands of happiness, and then get old or get sick, only to die—we need to understand our own identity. That is the first step to understanding one own calling, one's own worth, and the meaning of one's own life.

Maybe some are born to be the bosses, the movers and shakers, the CEOs, or the presidents. Or, maybe they are acutely suffering from their own uncontrollable ambitions and greed, but somehow managed to implement their own delusions. Maybe they are the abominations, occupying the positions where they should never have. Maybe, some of them are indeed not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of the sandals at all.

Who am I? Why am I put on this world? What is the purpose of my life? A Christian disciple should entertain these questions throughout the life time. The meaning of one's life and one's understanding of God's calling are inseparably connected through one's awareness of who one is and who one is not.

By the way things look nowadays, the CEOs of the Big Three auto makers look like panhandlers with gold-plated begging pans and corporate jets. They may have achieved some things others could not, but I really wonder, if they understood who they are and who they are not. I wonder, if they knew whether they were fulfilling their calling. Unwittingly, they certainly were preparing the way, but it wasn't in the wilderness, nor was it for the Lord.

One way of finding out one's identity is to know what one's action is. John the Baptist knew what he was doing. He also knew what he was not doing: he knew he baptized with water; he knew he wasn't baptizing with the Holy Spirit. Our action makes us who we are: we should know what we are doing, and why we are doing it. Similarly, we should know what we are not doing, and why we are not doing it. That awareness is the core of the true identity with which God confronts us when we stand before God's judgment seat.

Only when one understands who he is and who he is not, can one indeed take action and prepare the way of the Lord. And once we begin to prepare the way of the Lord, we will discover the true meaning of life, the worth of life, and the happiness of life.