

*“Prepare”**Isaiah 40.1–5 & Mark 1.1–8**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 7 December 2008*

The boxes came out of the basement last weekend. The big one was filled with all sorts of things: strands of LED lights that I had carefully spooled last year, the nutcrackers, and lots of smaller boxes. I pulled out the two small cardboard boxes that I shipped back from a bike trip in Austria 15 years ago with carved wooden nativity figures. The lights are now on the pine shrub and the house. The nativity figures are on the mantle, and the Advent candles are set up on the dining room table. We bought a Christmas tree yesterday and set it up in the living room. And in spite of the best efforts of the Mission Committee and their Alternative Giving Fair, I still have some Christmas shopping to do. And I have some cookies to bake...and two church gatherings to host. That means a lot of cleaning, and maybe even painting a wall or two.

And the Chancel Guild elves have been busy here at Plymouth, too, with nice wreathes and reversible wall hangings, and the Advent candles and lovely purple paraments. We've got a nice tree in the Fellowship Hall, courtesy of our junior high fellowship, too. And even Sherriff Jim Alderden has a public Christmas tree trimming party. As one of his staff was quoted in this morning's Coloradoan, "This is a real Christmas."

So, I think we're just about prepared for Christmas...right?

Knowing what we know about Isaiah, John the baptizer, and Jesus of Nazareth, are we prepared? Knowing what we know about God, are we prepared?



The setting of both scripture readings this morning is a desert wilderness. It isn't a nice, pleasant, or easy place to be. Rather, it's a place where death is never too far removed. Without water, food, shelter, and perhaps a guide it's easy to loose direction and succumb to the elements. This isn't the typical Christmas scene.

The wilderness is a place of transition in biblical literature. It's where God's people wander for 40 years before entering the promised land...where Jesus goes before he begins his public ministry. It separates not only nation from nation, Jerusalem from Babylon, Canaan from Egypt, but it is a frontier between one thing and another. It is a threshold we must cross before coming to a new beginning.

Second Isaiah, which our reading this morning begins, was written while the people were in Babylonian captivity in the 6th century BC. (The first 39 chapters were written before the exile.) So, for them, the wilderness stands between where they are being held and Zion, the place they call home.

Jerusalem is in ruins, yet Isaiah enunciates God's comfort. The price for their unfaithfulness has been paid, and now it is a transitional time. The moment has come to build a highway through the desert back to Zion. For them it is a highway for God – a way for us to re-establish relationship with God.

And the other desert wilderness we heard about this morning is home to John the Baptizer, an extraordinarily odd character who eats locusts and lives **way** off the grid six centuries later. And people are coming not just from the outlying areas, but from Jerusalem itself seeking baptism for the forgiveness of sins. For them, this is a threshold moment, going into the wilderness, crossing a threshold, and emerging into a new beginning.

Is our wilderness time of transition about getting stressed out about a Christmas party or having "the right" decorations? I hope not.

Our wilderness may be a vast inner landscape through which we must walk in order to find the meaning of Christ's birth. That wilderness has a lot more to do with teenagers

sleeping out in the snow than it does pairing the right wine with Christmas dinner. It has more to do with cardboard boxes out on our front lawn than it does placing a well-designed nativity scene in front of the church. It has more to do with supporting initiatives that assist people that we as a society would rather ignore and hope they just go away: the alien, the elderly, the poor, the homeless, the child, the uneducated, the uninsured, the mentally ill, and the list goes on.

The landscape that we need to construct is a highway of God's justice and Christ's compassion. It isn't Christmas trees, sugar cookies, and Rudolph – though they have their place, too. Building the highway is about substantive, systemic change that will help “the least of these who are members of my family” and not just about band-aid fixes that temporarily assuage our guilt, making **us** feel better. The highway is one of costly discipleship.

So, where are the areas where you are called to help build a highway?

Perhaps it's in your work life, your volunteering, your financial support, and what you pray for. Where can you plug in to something that is happening to help become a co-creator of the kingdom of God that is still unfolding?

Most of us find it easier to accept an infant, “tender and mild,” than we do a desert-dwelling, locust-eating prophet. And if we opt for Jesus himself, we find that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes far more likable than the young man who challenged the religious authorities of his day.

None of us is fully prepared to stand before Isaiah or John the Baptizer. Nor are we ready to tie the thong on Jesus' sandal. **So, how will you prepare?** How will you open your heart to “prepare him room?”

Let us prepare this Advent, not by making ourselves more comfortable, but by saying a prayer, lighting a candle, taking an action, by becoming co-creators in the kingdom of God – here and now and still unfolding. It is only in the process of preparing for a glorious reign of peace and justice that we will find the true comfort Isaiah prophesied.

Amen.