

Sermon *Prepare a Way for the Lord*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels Episcopal Church 12.10.23

Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent. The Gospel lesson for this morning starts with *The beginning of the Good News of Jesus (the) Christ*. That's how Mark began his Gospel and quickly went right to John the Baptizer who said: Prepare the way of the Lord!

When I hear that phrase, it takes me back to my childhood. The movie (based on the Broadway show) *Godspell* came out in 1973. My parents bought the soundtrack. I was four-years old so I didn't see it in the theater but I did hear it over and over again in our house. The beginning of *Godspell* is a lone voice singing, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" When I heard the Gospel lesson this morning, it immediately took me back to singing along to *Godspell* with my parents.

The Broadway production of *Godspell* came out in 1971. The creators, John-Michael Tebelak and Stephen Schwartz, wrote it during a dark time in U.S. history. JFK had been assassinated. We were at war in southeast Asia. There were civil rights protests and riots. Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. In all of that, they began their musical performance with "Prepare the way of the Lord." It was their reaction to the scariness and uncertainty of their times.

We heard from Isaiah, chapter 40 today. This pivot chapter is a signal of hope. What led to it was first, King David untied the 12 tribes of Israel into one, powerful nation. He began the building of the Temple to hold the Ark of the Covenant. His son, Solomon, finished the Temple which was the most amazing and beautiful of its kind. Much later on, the Assyrians invaded the northern section of Israel and then later the Babylonians invaded the southern Judean area including Jerusalem. They destroyed the Temple – stone from stone – the Ark of the Covenant went missing (still is missing despite the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*). The Israelites were dragged into captivity. All seemed lost. In that incredibly dark time, Isaiah began to say: Prepare a way for the Lord! Make the paths straight and smooth. In other words: get ready, we're going back home, get ready! And they did, 70 years in exile, they returned home.

In Jesus' day, the Temple had been rebuilt. Commonly called The Second Temple, this is the one Jesus walked around in and was built to be as grand as the first one (but without the Ark of the Covenant). By the time Mark started writing his Gospel, however, things were not looking good. Emperor Nero – the most powerful emperor Rome had ever seen at the time – set his sights onto the small and young Church. He began his persecution of the followers of Jesus. When Mark started writing, around the year 64, it was a dark and scary time for the believers. Nevertheless, he began his Gospel with: Prepare the way of the Lord!

The light of Isaiah 40, the light of John's words, the light of the Gospel shines when everything seems so dark and uncertain. How would Mark write about it today?

This past Tuesday, Christi and I were given tickets to see *Joyful! Joyful!* at the West Coast Black Theater Troupe. There is an exclamation point after each word – Joyful! Joyful! And it was. If you are looking for some hope and joy this season, go see that show. It will fill you up with joy and hope.

The show started with Nate Jacobs, the founder and artistic director of the WCBTT. He walked out on stage and thanked us for coming and for supporting live theater. He then told us this story: in March of 2020, he came to the theater to find that it had been closed because of Covid. He was told, “Nate, every theater in the country and the world has to close.” He asked what he should do. He was told, “Go home.” So he did. He went home and sat on his couch. He knew he had a lot of phone calls to make; starting with the board president and then the performers; but he didn’t move. He sat on the couch and stared at his wall for two hours. He was imagining all the theaters going dark around the world. It’s never happened before (and hopefully will never happen again). The theater is his life. It’s his identity. It’s where he feels safe, accepted and loved. It is where he can be free to be who he is, to make others smile, sing, dance, cry and laugh. It is his home and his family. And now, it was dark. While he sat on the couch, he began to hear a voice say to him: *Nate, the light does not come from outside to shine on you; the light comes from the inside and shines outward. Let your light shine.* He made the phone calls he had to make and then, thinking of the light shining in a darkened theater, he sat down at his piano and wrote *Joyful! Joyful!* That performance was his reaction to the theater-world going dark. It is in the darkest times that we see the light shining.

In our day and time, Prepare the way of the Lord is a way of saying: Let your light shine. The light comes from inside of you and shines outward. The light came from inside of Isaiah and he proclaimed: Prepare the way; we’re going home; the messiah will come! In the dark times of John the Baptizer, when all seemed to be lost to the Roman Empire, he stood out in the middle of the Jordan River and proclaimed: Prepare the way of the Lord. In the persecuted times of John-Mark the Gospel writer, he sat down and wrote: This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Prepare the way of the Lord!

No matter what is going on in your life; what is going on in the life of our community – while I have been talking to you, I have seen two police cars circle in around our neighbors, Temple Beth Israel; they are there for safety and as reminder of how difficult it is right now – no matter what is happening in the life of our nation. While we worry about our own health, the health of our country and everything happening in the world, Isaiah, John, and Mark are inviting us to prepare the way of the Lord by letting our light shine. It’s not a light that comes in from the outside to light us up; it’s a light that God shines from inside of us and it shows outward. When we let our light shine, we are preparing the way of the Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.