

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 61: 1 – 4, 8 – 11
 1 Thessalonians 5: 16 – 24

Ps. 126 (Canticle 15)
 John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28

Years ago, when I lived in Jacksonville, Florida, there was a section of Interstate 10, very close to where it began (or terminated, depending on your direction) at I-95, that seemed to be always under construction. The road was widened, straightened and smoothed, repaved and remarked. About anything that *could* be done to it was. One of the priests at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, where I attended, referred to it as the "Zone of Eternal Construction." I lived in Jacksonville for six years and never knew a time when it wasn't being worked on; it was *always* in process.

Later, after I had moved away, and after lots of money, the Florida DOT decided they were finished filling rough spots, mending potholes, and rebanking and straightening bad curves. They put away all their equipment and signs. After years of preparation and work, watching and waiting, traffic jams and detours, all the many lanes of smooth, black asphalt with their bright gold and white lines, were opened to traffic.

Whenever I hear the prophet, Isaiah, or John the Baptizer cry out, "Make straight the way of the Lord," this construction scene on I-10 comes to mind. John's words reflect an ancient tradition of welcoming and making the journey shorter and safer for a visiting VIP or royalty. Unless you were traveling on some of *Pax Romana's* roads of paving stones, ancient roadways were often little more than tracks in the desert, or perhaps rutted, muddy paths. The routes meandered hither and yon, and were easily blown away or washed out. Even on the paved roads it was rough walking or riding. So, when word came that a ruler was coming to visit, and if the people wanted to be in the ruler's good graces, work crews would go out from the city and improve the road by filling in the rough places and straightening curves. The hope was to make the journey as short and comfortable as possible. A straight and level path was a way of preparing for and ushering in a much-anticipated guest.

Advent is one of those times for us in which we, like John, are called to make straight the way of the Lord. Advent is a season of preparing for and ushering in a much-anticipated guest. Our joy, our most exalted calling, is to become part of the work crew, sort of a heavenly DOT, and make straight the way of the Lord. We are to make ready ourselves, and we are to make ready our world, for the infusion of the glorious, new Jerusalem of which God speaks. Like John, we are to point to and prepare for the Kingdom of God, revealed through the coming of Jesus Christ.

The prophet, Isaiah, also points to the coming Kingdom of God. The Lord has sent me, the prophet Isaiah says, to bring good news to the oppressed. Isaiah paints a sweeping vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like: a Kingdom where there is healing for the brokenhearted, liberty for the captive, rejoicing for those who mourn, rebuilding of all that is in ruins, and salvation for God's people. What Isaiah describes is the true home for which our hearts long, and John tells us that the coming of Jesus Christ initiates the beginning of this reality. Isaiah and John both tell us that it is time to prepare for the fulfillment of this vision. It is time to make straight the way of the Lord.

Now, not counting the people who are trying to out-do Clark Griswold in the movie, "Christmas Vacation," I wonder if, for some folks at least, the earlier, the larger and the more extravagant the display of Christmas lights, the emptier, the hungrier that household is for the true light which comes down from heaven. Whether the inhabitants of said household know it or not. That is not to imply the

opposite, namely that darkness or tastefulness necessarily signify spiritual fulfillment. But whatever the case, at this time of year, with the rush and temptations of our secular, cultural Christmas, it is extremely easy to get our priorities out of whack. We readily lose the idea of Advent waiting and watching, of preparing and making straight the way of the Lord. And instead, we are sorely tempted to fall under the spell of sugarplums dancing in our heads, and to be consumed by our world's wilderness of material accumulation. We can so easily abandon our call into a spiritual quietude and allow ourselves to be swept up in the holiday hubbub.

And then, we are suddenly confronted by John the Baptist, calling us back to reality, calling us back to make room for God, not only in our hearts but in our lives. "Among you stands one whom you do not know," warns John the Baptist. We superficially satisfy our deepest longings for God by putting up more decorations, going to more parties, buying more and bigger gifts, by staying so busy that we cannot possibly be still and know that God is already present among us. But John calls us to strip away all the busyness and fussiness of our plans and our lives to focus on what is really important: ushering in the Kingdom of God.

"He has *sent* me to bring good news to the oppressed..." says Isaiah. "There was a man *sent* from God," writes the evangelist John about John the Baptizer. Both Isaiah and John are sent by God. We often talk about "call" in the church. I definitely felt called to ordained ministry. Trinity is called to serve the community of Statesboro in a variety of ways. Many times in sermons I have said that we are called to do the work that God has given us to do. But there would seem to be a significant difference between being called and "sent."

The Rev. Rick Morley differentiates it this way: Being called means that God has come to us, where we are and commissioned us to do something for the Kingdom. Being sent...well, he says, that means that, somehow, we are with God, aligned with God in some special way and commissioned to go somewhere. And it seems rather bodacious to us to somehow claim that God has sent us. And yet, God has sent Isaiah and John the Baptizer to prepare the way of the Lord. The apostle, Paul, writes a number of times about being sent by God. Jesus sends the seventy out to try their hands at ministry. And, before he ascends into heaven, Jesus sends his followers to all the corners of the earth to share the Good News. God sends. Jesus sends. And who do they send? People just like you and me.

The Rev. Morley points out something that perhaps should bring us comfort when we are getting too whiggged out with the thought of God sending *us*. He notes that God's sending of John has absolutely nothing to do with John himself. Rather, it is absolutely clear that John is sent to witness to the Light. John knows that he, in no way, shape or form, IS the Light. He is simply to testify to it. Which makes the idea of being sent by God much more bearable. It's a privilege – and a responsibility – but it isn't about *us*. It's about God. And what God has already done for us. And letting others know about it.

God sends Isaiah, and later, God sends John, to prepare the way for God coming into the world. To be the voice of one crying in the wilderness. God has always sent people to bring God's word to the people of this world. God has sent the prophets to speak of God's justice and compassion. God has sent John to speak of God's forgiveness and redemption. God sends you and me and people just like us to every corner of the world to make straight in the desert a highway for our King and to help usher in the Kingdom of God.

What would we do differently with our time this holiday season if our highest priority was to make ready for the Kingdom of God, for the coming of Christ into this world? Sometimes, our busyness

of this season more closely represents a shallow remembrance of something that happened long ago. How would our season of preparation, waiting and watching differ if we approached the coming of Christ as something truly imminent?

“I think that the purpose and cause of the incarnation was that God might illuminate the world by God’s wisdom, and excite the world to the love of God,” wrote 12th century French philosopher and theologian, Peter Abelard. How are we reflecting the light of Christ this Advent in order to illuminate the world with God’s wisdom? How are we helping to prepare others so that they might become passionately in love with God?

In Advent, we wait, but we don’t just wait passively. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we are shaped by what it is for which we wait. We are molded and changed by what we anticipate. In Advent, we also watch, but we also don’t watch passively. We watch with an alertness to the sacred all around us. We are called to become aware of our connectedness with one another and with all of Creation. We are to see and hear the extraordinary in the ordinary. We are to come alive with gratitude for the gifts which already surround us. This is how we help to “Make straight the way of the Lord!” in this world this Advent.

Let us pray. God in Heaven, hallowed be your name. With your wisdom, in your light and through your love, help us to make straight the way of the Lord, so that your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

+