

December 4, 2011, Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Waiting for Glory

My grandparents were married in the early 1920s in the state of Illinois. They met when my grandfather was a student pastor at the church my grandmother belonged to. Immediately after the wedding, they headed for Arizona. Arizona had only been a state for about a dozen years or so at that time, and it was still pretty much the Wild West.

As a Methodist pastor, my grandfather went to Annual Conference each June, just as we do now. The trip from just south of Tucson to Redlands took about 4 days.

The roads were paved only in places, and they went up all the little hills and down into all the gullies. In many places they drove on washboard roads, meaning that there were grooves cut across them by wind and rain and they were very rough. Top speed was cut to well below 20 mph, and the vibrations were intense.

Four days to travel those rough roads to Redlands! And four days back! Longer when they had car trouble! One time they had to wait three days for a car part to be brought from LA to San Bernardino when their brakes went out coming down the Cajon Pass!

Today the same trip from Arizona takes about six or seven hours.

When I-10 and I-8 were built, the engineers did their best to make the rough places smooth, the hills and valleys level. With those improvements, the journey is much easier and much, much faster.

The interstate highways are much straighter through the desert than the old roads were, and while there are still mountains to climb over, at least travelers don't have to go down and up through every single little ditch!

This morning's passage from Isaiah speaks of making the rough places smooth and leveling the mountains and the valleys and making a straight highway for our Lord to travel in the desert

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Isaiah tells us that when that happens, then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed to all people.

Isaiah spoke to give people of his time hope that the Lord would someday appear. Several hundred years later, John the Baptist quoted the prophet to give the people of his own time hope. In John's time, the rough places were still rough. The mountains and the valleys were still not level.

The same holds true today---life is still difficult for most of us---really for all of us--- in some way or another. Everyone is struggling with something---fighting a battle of some kind.

Isaiah tells us that as soon as everything is smoothed out, God's glory will be revealed to all people. When he told them that "surely the people are grass, here today and tomorrow thrown into the oven," he was giving them hope. Unjust rulers would not last forever. Things would change in the world, but the Word of God would not!

John the Baptist reminded people of that prophecy! He was telling them that God had not abandoned them, that the glory of God would be revealed! There was hope for them as well.

He was urging them to prepare their hearts and minds and souls for the coming of the Lord!

He was telling them to prepare by smoothing out the rough spots of their hearts and making their minds and souls level.

In the desert of the human condition, he was telling them, just as Isaiah was telling the people of his day, to make a straight, smooth way for the glory of the Lord to be revealed in their lives.

In this season of Advent, we are preparing once again for the coming of Christ into our hearts so that the glory of the Lord can be revealed in us and shown to all people.

How do we prepare the way? It sounds so mystical, so mysterious.

Or ---- maybe it seems mundane, because, after all, we do it every year, year after year, and still we wait.

In our passage from the Second Letter of Peter, we are told that we should wait by being “at peace, without spot or blemish,” waiting for Christ to bring the new heaven and new earth like “a thief in the night”--- unexpectedly.

So what does this mean?

How do we wait, “at peace, without spot or blemish”?

First of all, we need to recognize our place in God’s creation. Isaiah is firm on this subject---we are like grass. We come and go. Only the Word of God lasts forever.

We are not God and we shouldn’t try to be. We need to find peace instead, in the assurance that we are loved by God.

This morning we lit the second Advent candle, the candle of Love, and we heard that “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that we who believe may not perish but have eternal life.”

God’s love is the best gift we have ever received!

And if we really believe that God loves us that much, maybe it won't be so hard to wait at peace. Maybe it won't be so difficult to be "without spot or blemish." If we really feel loved by God, maybe all of that will grow out of that assurance naturally!

When we know beyond any doubt that we are loved, we are stronger, more secure, less anxious, at peace and more sure of the ways we ought to act, more definite in our good decisions.

So what would it take for you to really believe that you are loved?

What would have to happen to give you absolute assurance of God's love?

For the people of Jesus' time, it was difficult. People saw Jesus, heard him speak, were healed by him or saw others who were healed or heard someone talk about the many people he healed.

People followed him around and listened to his voice, knew what he looked like, and saw the miracles of the loaves and fish, the raising of Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, the water becoming wine.

They heard him argue with the Pharisees, saw him change lives and teach with authority in a way no other teacher had ever taught!

People saw him alive again after he was crucified.

There was every reason to believe that he really was the Son of God, bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives.

And many believed. But more people did not.

Maybe it's hard to imagine that anyone could see Jesus in the flesh with their own eyes and still not believe who he is, but it happened.

And for us, even though we say we believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior, sometimes that testimony stays in our heads and forgets to travel all the way to our hearts.

Because even though we believe that God loves us enough to send his son to save us from sin and death, our hearts have not quite accepted that gift.

Maybe we have broken the ribbon on the package. Maybe we have torn the paper off and maybe the lid is off the box.

But the gift of that love is still nestled down in the tissue paper, waiting to be taken out .

So, how do we know, deep down in our deepest place, that God loves us?

When you were a little kid, how did you know your mom and dad loved you? If you were in a bad situation and you didn't know your mom and dad loved you, what could have been different so that you would have had the 100% assurance that they did?

What is it that makes love real to you?

Spending time together? Talking things over? A warm touch?

Being cared for when you're sick? Being forgiven when you mess up?

Let's start with spending time together. You've taken a big step on that one just by being here. But you can spend time with God in more places and more ways than in worship on Sunday morning! You can pray wherever you are.

You know, praying doesn't always mean sitting still and being quiet, with your hands folded. You can pray with pen and paper in hand, writing out your prayers. And you just might be surprised---sometimes God's words come through the pen and right on to the paper and you would have never thought of those words on your own!

You can also pray while you walk, letting the rhythm of your steps become the rhythm of the words you and God are saying to one another.

If you have ever walked a labyrinth, maybe you know how the movement of your body becomes the movement of the Holy Spirit. If you would ever like to try walking a labyrinth, there's one at First United Methodist Church just across Mission Valley. If you would like me to go with you, just let me know and I would be happy to!

You can pray with music. You can pray as a group. There are many ways to pray and they are all spending time with God.

But it's important to remember that even when you're not praying, God is with you. At the end of every day, think about the ways God has been present with you during the day. And then see if you don't feel just a bit more loved by God.

If you are needing a warm touch, well, Jesus Christ isn't walking among us physically any more. He doesn't have hands to touch us with. But one way we can experience that warm, loving touch is by reading scripture and putting ourselves in the stories. Maybe you are a child that Jesus is taking onto his knee. Maybe you are the leper or the blind man or the man who is deaf. What would it have been like to feel his hands?

And to take this experience from imagination to reality, we can be with people who love us and feel their touches and know that all love is of God, and so in actual fact the God who is love is touching us, too!

If you are in need of forgiveness to feel loved by God, just take that to God in prayer. Partake of Holy Communion. God forgives us and invites us to the Table of the Lord as forgiven and sanctified people.

In the sacrament, forgiveness is made real and solid and visible. When I say the words, "in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven," and you say them back to me, we are not just blowing smoke. The words are powerful and the forgiveness is reality.

Taking Communion, if you open your heart to it, makes God's love for you more real, in a deeper place in your soul.

There are so many ways to feel that God loves you all the way to your very core. Let what you say you believe reach way down deep inside of you and drink it in, soak it up, rest in it!

Because when you do, the rough places of your heart will be made smooth and the hills and the valleys of the path between your brain and your heart will level out.

The journey of the knowledge that God loves you will move from head knowledge to your heart in much less time when the way is smooth and level.

What might have taken many years at one time will take only a fraction of that time, just like it used to take 4 days to get across the desert from Tucson to Redlands and now it only takes hours.

When my grandparents prepared for their journey from Arizona to California every year eighty and more years ago, they carefully planned, taking food and water, a tire repair kit, extra gas, clothes and all the supplies they would need along the way.

They didn't just get in the car and hope for the best.

We must prepare for the Lord's coming just as carefully, spending just as much time and thought.

Spend time with God in prayer, listening for the word of God which lasts forever.

Pay attention to the ways that God is present with you in your everyday life.

See the love of Christ in the love of others for you, and show Christ's love to others as well!

Make straight in the desert of your life a highway for our God! Make the rough places of your heart smooth, and level out the distance between your head and your heart!

And wait for the glory of the Lord. It WILL come upon you!

Amen.