

December 6, 2020, 2nd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Jacob Lanthier and Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

A dialogue sermon: Jacob, Jen

The Heartwork of Road Building

Let us pray. May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our way and our redeemer. Amen.

Grace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus.

We are venturing toward Christmas, moving toward the birth of Jesus.

This morning I am grateful that Jacob Lanthier accepted the invitation to talk, and, if you will, travel, together.

We are sharing a dialogue sermon with an eye and ear toward what God is doing in our lives and in our hearts, and to where God is calling us.

A couple of months ago I began mulling over another shared sermon and praying about who might be that conversation partner.

Time and again it felt like Jacob was the person to ask.

When I finally called him up... Jacob said yes!

Some of you know Jacob and his partner Kenzie.

They've been around Hope for a couple of years and divide time with Kenzie's Catholic congregation, Our Lady of Lourdes in northeast.

Jacob grew up in the Andover and Brooklyn Park areas.

He did his undergrad work at the U and then went to law school here, too, finishing up in the midst of the pandemic last spring.

Thank you, Jacob, for agreeing to bring the gospel today!

So to get going this morning, let's take a look at the scripture readings.

What did you notice about the passages? What stuck out? What spoke to you?

In Isaiah I notice the comforting going on here as well as the description of heavy civil engineering and construction

In this Psalm I really notice the way the ideas of love, faithfulness, and righteousness come alive and create a sense of comfort. These ideas take a very active role in the future that God is promising.

In 2nd Peter I noticed how big of an undertaking it is to strip away the elements and reveal everything that was hidden.

In Mark I notice the depiction of a road being made through the wilderness and the idea that John is bringing baptism with him on that road.

It sounds like these images of roads resonate with you.

As we prepared you mentioned research you've done about ancient roads.

Let's just be honest, not everyone does research about ancient roads!

I think of road building and think of that monstrous 35W road project, and about a civil engineering friend who designs highways for MNDOT.

Can you talk more about roads? How did this ancient road building work?

So first I would think about the context these texts come from.

Mark is in the era of Ancient Rome, where the roads are famous for their engineering and the fact that Roman Roads spread from Britain to the Euphrates in Modern day Iraq. They were everywhere.

And in Isaiah, the context is that the reality of the Babylonian Captivity, where the Judeans were forced into Babylonian society. In Babylon, roads played a big part in ritual and religion, as their gods were represented in statutes and physically brought along processional roads to their temples. If you've seen depictions of the great blue gates of babylon and the long road that goes through them, this is what I'm talking about.

So why does this context of roads matter?

How can it help us understand our passages today?

Roads are meant to carry things.

In this setting, they are meant to carry things to us, and into us.

In Mark with John the Baptist's time, we're being asked to build a road into ourselves for Christ to come.

It's an analogy for how we let in and bring in God's grace, the Gospel.

This is classic Advent, isn't it?

John is calling the people to repent, to be ready for what Jesus' birth brings.

And, in turn, to be ready to do this gospel work of love and justice in the world.

When we were talking about today, Jacob, talking about this sermon, you began to muse about preparing.

What are you preparing for? How are you preparing?

The first thought I have is to talk about the events I am preparing for, that big hearing coming up, holidays with family, bills.

My second realization was, when I asked myself what I was really preparing for and what I could talk about in this space, in front of everyone, was: Identity. What does it mean for me to be Christian, to have that in my mindset?

What does it mean for me as a member of this faith?

The answer for me is that: This brings me grace. The gift I see is comfort and strength.

John recalls Isaiah and cries, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

John is calling us to do our own preparing.

How do you relate to this?

I think of grace as inner strength that we’re given by God, by Jesus.

John is trying to draw that grace out from us, almost to incite that extra fire, that urge, that strength in us that we’re given by God.

There is so much around us that feels heavy... COVID, our economic straits, injustice, political turmoil.

This weighs on us and feels like it’s diminishing our spirits.

Grace is the strength to roll with the punches and also come out at the end wanting to find God.

We started off this morning talking about roads.

What are the obstacles in your road?

When I think of obstacles I think about debris, fallen trees, trash. Those are things to go around.

A couple years ago I went backpacking in Thailand and saw roads crammed with people.

This summer we witnessed a lot of protestors in the roads here, as well.

My deeper obstacles often revolve around faith. With my path it was never very straight forward, I was baptized Lutheran, meandered, and found my way back. Now I’m more involved than I probably ever have been.

When I first came to Hope, I really had to think and prepare myself mentally to come and accept grace as a part of my life.

At first, I did my research on what this church would be like. I think about the history and tradition of thinking actively about Grace itself. At Hope we talk about that grace, that individual relationship and how that benefits our lives. This community is more accepting, open, flexible, always comes back to grace, that spiritual relationship.

As we were wrapping up our preparations, you and I tried to pick a title, seeking to clarify our focus.

We landed on this: The Heartwork of Road Building.

Not the hard work (though sometimes it is hard), but the HEART work. The Heartwork of Road Building.

Isaiah and John both are telling us to prepare the way of the Lord. Take the time to pause and to think about the work you need to do in your heart that is preparing the way for God.

Stop and think about that inner strength, that Grace, and how it comforts us but it also drives us to think more about our relationship with God.

Think of the road that Jesus is coming on and how we're building the road to ourselves.

If we let God build that road in our hearts, then we can find a way to share our hearts and that Grace with the world.

What would that look like for you, Jacob, this week?

That would look like finding the patience to help my clients who truly need it and to take the time to make sure that they are getting the support that they need.

What about for you, Jen? What would that look like for you?

These are such intense and heavy times...heavy in the news, heavy in the struggle, heavy at home.

For me, it looks like some really intentional grounding, prayer, asking God to work in me: holding what I can hold, trusting God to hold it all, and, really, being graceful with myself and others, graceful with you all, and also with my kids, my spouse.

Again, today, take the time to think about the road that God has started and that we are building into our hearts. Think about how you are building that road each day.

Beloved, it's Advent, you know that.

Take the time to prepare your hearts, to do the heartwork, AND, at once, take time to rest in the comfort, the fullness, the love of our God, of God's community.

**Jacob, you've shared so much of your faith: the grace that holds you,
the times when the road has been clear,
and when it's been less clear, clouded by uncertainty.**

John the baptist cries in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord.

**In the intensity of these times, the isolation, the sickness,
we prepare the way trusting that God makes a way both within our hearts,
and into this broken and beautiful world.**

Thank you, Jacob, thank you for sharing this preaching, and for sharing this road.

And let the people say Amen. Amen.