

Advent 2A

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

December 4, 2016

My hometown in North Carolina is nestled in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. When my sister and I were growing up, we were only about an hour away from ski mountains, quaint village shops, and the church camp we attended often.

There was only one main highway that connected the two locations. It twisted and turned around the ever-rising hills. As hills turned into mountains there would be short stretches where a second lane would appear so that cars could zip past slow climbing trucks. As the years went by the road was expanded even more. Soon, there were two lanes in each direction most of the way. But there was still a half-mile bit with hairpin turns where there was no more room to add any lanes.

It was a bottle neck. Many accidents would occur there because drivers either wouldn't or couldn't yield to the heavy, slow moving trucks. To remedy this problem and increase safety, the Department of Transportation authorized a multi-million-dollar project to straighten out this section of the highway so that lanes could be added. Quite literally, they were going to move mountains.

When the straightened road hit a rock face they blew it up and paved ahead. When the road came upon a valley they took the freshly made gravel and piled it up. It took close to four years to move those mountains. Four years and many tons of explosives to straighten and level half a mile of road.

I think about that highway a lot this time of year. For one, the new road is really a dream to drive especially when the first winter snow starts to cover the vistas as you climb the mountain. But more importantly,

because that road and its transformation is a simple way for me to visualize the joy and profound challenge of Advent, indeed our whole lives.

Joy lies in the expectant hope to which we cling as we wait for the coming of the Christ. We celebrate Christ's presence with us now while keeping watch for his coming again. We hear the words of Isaiah, a vision of the peaceable kingdom: where the old structures of life are replaced with peace. Predator ceases the chase and grazes with the prey. The poisons of nature and society are rendered inert. The most disenfranchised members of humanity play over the holes that once harbored death.

We close our eyes and dream this dream ourselves, casting our prayers towards the sky in hope. We wonder when all of this will be. But eventually we have to open our eyes again to see that the world around us doesn't seem to have changed. Predator still stalks prey. Poison still infects and destroys. The marginalized are still pushed farther and farther away. Death is still a gaping hole in our soul.

Suddenly our Lenten cry of "How long, O Lord?" seems to replace our "Silent Nights." Mountains still stand in our way. The path is as crooked as ever - a bottleneck. Thus the profound challenge of Advent: how do we live in the promised reality of Messiah while still navigating the hairpin turns of a world not-so-peaceable?

For John the Baptist, the answer is simple: repent. Turn around. Refocus on what's really important. For the wild man in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord is taking a close look at how we might have been the ones putting mountains and valleys in the way. Have we become complicit in predatory relationships? Has the poison of our words hurt another? Has our action or inaction pushed people to the

fringe? Have we done things or left things undone? Have we not loved our neighbors as ourselves?

If you're starting to think I must have written a Lenten sermon by mistake, you aren't wrong. But it is not a mistake.

Advent's call to prepare the way of the Lord is one that calls us to blow up the mountains and build up the valleys, especially the ones we might have made. John the Baptist reminds us to bear fruit out of that repentance. Reminds us to go out there and do and say and give and love so generously that every predatory instinct and poisonous strike, that every hairpin -ism and -phobia, is blown up into a pile of rubble.

When water mixed with word and fire is poured over our bodies we too receive the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of council and might, of knowledge and the fear of God. The same fire which burns away the chaff of our lives sets us free to live in harmony with all of God's people. It is the fire that sparks the fuse that demolishes the barriers between any "us" and "them" we try to fabricate.

This Advent we await the growing light of the star that hovers over a simple stable in a backwater town. We look towards the heavens and dream of that peaceable kingdom one day promised. But we don't forget to lower our gaze back to the curvy roads of our world and remember that we have an active role in "thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven."

Are you ready to move mountains?