

In The Desert: Isaiah 40:1-11 (3-5)

“A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.””

The Highway of Tears is an 800 km section of Hwy 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert in British Columbia. Since 1969, it is estimated that over 40 young women have disappeared along that stretch of road. The bodies of some of the women have been found, but many are still missing. There is no doubt about where this highway begins in both a physical and a metaphorical sense: in a dark and hostile wilderness.

The section of Hwy 401 between Trenton and the Don Valley Parkway has been designated the Highway of Heroes. It is the route taken by funeral convoys for fallen Canadian Forces personnel upon their return from the war. This highway too begins in a dark and hostile wilderness.

Both highways begin in the wilderness. Perhaps for many of us, the road that we are travelling can often seem like it starts in a rather dark, harsh, and difficult place.

Everywhere in scripture, the wilderness or the desert is the location of danger, hostility, and evil. It's a place where there is little nourishment for body or spirit. It is barren, uninhabitable, and often cruel. It is a place where people die of thirst or cold or heat or at the hands of bandits or by the mouths of the wild animals. It is a place where people feel abandoned, lost, homeless, and unsafe. It is a place where it's hard to have hope. We are familiar with the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites when they travelled from Egypt to the special land that God had promised them. We call to mind the biblical images of the wild beasts that live in the desert. Both the Babylonian and the Assyrian exiles were times of desert-existence. And of course, we remember Jesus own experience in the wilderness where he was tempted by the Evil One himself.

But mysteriously, it is in the wilderness that God chooses to begin his work of forming a people after his own heart. The wilderness has always been the training ground for faith and worship for God's people. It is in the wilderness that the people of Israel were formed as a nation. It was in the wilderness that they learned how to live together in a community that was dedicated to the covenant God had made with them. It was in the wilderness that they learned the patterns of worship, of faith, and of trust in God's faithfulness and provision.

Centuries after their desert wanderings had come to completion in the Promised Land, God's people once again found themselves in the hostile wilderness of exile. Into this wilderness prophets like Isaiah came to speak the words that would re-form them again into God's people. Isaiah's words would call them to turn back to God, to remember the covenant of love and care that He had made with them. Into the experience of darkness and exile, Isaiah spoke words of hope that pointed to a new future as God's people.

In all these instances, God met his people *in* the wilderness, called them *out* of it, and led them *into* a bright future: a welcome and fruitful land flowing with milk and honey, inhabited by the actual presence of God himself.

Into the harsh reality of the slavery, homelessness, insecurity and anxiety, Isaiah proclaimed that God would meet his people and lead them home again. But while they waited, they had a job to do: they were to “prepare a way in the wilderness”. In the midst of the wilderness, prepare to be led out of it.

But how did they prepare the way to be led out? One of the things that the ancient Israelites did as they were being prepared and strengthened as God’s people, especially before the monarchy was established, was to raise up an Ebenezer: a stone of help (1 Sam 7:12). These marked the way that God sustained and upheld them through their many difficult experiences. These stones proclaimed to all: “thus far, the Lord has helped us”. The Israelites continued to set up such stones as their “highway” through the wilderness, as a reminder that God hadn’t abandoned them. God gave them strength for that one next step they needed to take, so that all together they would finally see the goodness of the Lord revealed.

The highway image in Isaiah is similar. The people were to prepare a way, make a road, form a path, cobble together some stones to make a highway that would lead *out* from the wilderness and back *into* their homeland. This highway would be a sign to everyone who saw it and walked on it that God was Lord and Ruler, and He looked after his people no matter what, and He was faithful to lead them out of dark and ugly places into a future infused with God himself.

If we take a look through history we see that individual as well as collective lives have been marked by significant wildernesses. Some of these dark times are very dark indeed: world wars, genocide, ethnic cleansing, slave trade, human trafficking, famine, and abject poverty. In some instances, God has led his people out into a new hope. In other instances, the people still cry out with longing and hope, awaiting God’s comfort.

There are other kinds of wildernesses as well. These might not seem so great on a global scale, but they can be just as immobilizing and fearful. These are the wildernesses of our own lives: when relationships fall apart, when loved ones die, when identity is hard to find, when illness causes suffering, when we experience the anxiety and fear that is inherent in the unknown.

I think it is important to acknowledge that our lives here at St. Andrew’s might feel a bit desert-like these days. As a community we are experiencing an abundance of intense emotions, fear and anxiety about an unknown future, the end of an era of the “known”, of security and stability. But it is *in the midst* of this desert that we are formed together as the body of Christ. Here in this place we learn how to be a community together and how to worship together. Here we are preparing and being prepared for the Advent of God – the coming of God, the Good Shepherd who will lead his flock into green pastures and quiet waters and places of peace and purpose and restoration. Together we hear the words of comfort that the prophet proclaims, as well as the words of action: prepare!

And so just as we are anticipating the coming of God as that wee babe, and just as we are eagerly expecting the final and complete coming of God to be revealed on the earth, we also await with hope the God who makes his home among us and who makes us into his home and who leads us out into his purposes. And as we wait, we prepare the highway. We set one stone down at a time. We raise up one Ebenezer at a time, proclaiming with confidence that “thus far, God *has* been our help and he will continue to be”. We take one step at a time because sometimes all we are given is sight and light for that first step. But it’s the first step on the way home.

What does that first step look like? What does that stone of help look like? It looks like loving one another. It looks like allowing ourselves to be formed into the community of God’s people, the body of Christ on earth. It looks like praying together, eating together, worshipping together, and engaging in ministry together. It looks like looking for the next step to take, the next place to lay down a ‘stone of help’.

Preparing the way isn’t easy work and it isn’t busy work. It’s work. Usually hard work. One of the things that our mission team in Nicaragua noticed was the work of road building was all done by hand. No big machines. No fancy tools to make the work easier. Just hard labour. But the workers did it together and they got it done. And their road got longer and it led somewhere.

Stone upon stone. Step after step. Meal after meal. Prayer after prayer. We travel along this highway in the wilderness, confident it leads us home, and soon enough we will see that God’s presence in our midst has led us out into a rich and beautiful land.

Father Alfred Delp was a German priest who was imprisoned for treason during the Nazi regime. He is a man whose mind and body had known the most horrific 20th century wilderness, in the midst of which he remained hopeful, faithful, and expectant for the coming of the Lord. I leave you with his Advent words of hope.

“Let us be patient and wait, wait with Advent readiness for the moment when it pleases God to appear in our night too, as the fruit and mystery of this time... Let us live in today’s Advent, for it is the time of promise... Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, the shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come... This is today. And tomorrow the angels will tell what has happened with loud rejoicing voices and we shall know it and be glad, if we have believed and trusted in Advent.”¹

Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

¹ Father Alfred Delp, in “Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas”. Orbis Books, p.94-95