

## How Will We Clear a Path For God?

The Love that is God gathers us for a time of reflection on this second Sunday in the deep blue season of Advent – a season of hopeful watching for light to break into our lives and into the life of the world in new ways. This morning, we wonder with the prophet, the Psalmist, and the gospel writer: How will we clear a path for God?

Let's begin with prayer: God, you are peace whose depth and power are beyond our comprehension. We are grateful that your healing love is always available to embrace and empower us. May our hearts and minds be radically open to your Holy Spirit as you create new pathways within and among us today. Amen.

*'Make ready the way of our God. Clear a straight path.'*" This unflinching command comes from the prophetic work of Isaiah in the sixth century BCE and echoes with relevance for each generation as it is handed forward. If we are to take this command to heart and seek to heed it, I invite us to ask three questions of the text and of ourselves: What? Why? How?

**WHAT** does a cleared, straight path (the ready way) for God look like?

**WHY** would we make ready the way or clear a straight path for God?

**HOW** can we make ready the way or clear a straight path for God?

I hope that pondering these questions will support us in responding to the prophet's call. As a precursor to sitting with each of those questions, I first wonder this: how would you describe your current movement along your own life path? I took the photo that appears on the cover of our worship bulletin today. At the time, I was moving through the woods that surrounds my parents' home in northern Wisconsin.

My great grandparents immigrated from the Astro-Hungarian empire to settle there. Approximately 70 years later, I was born into the home they had created there. My parents continue to live there. When I took the photo, I was likely moving unhurriedly through the woods on skis or snowshoes. I look forward to returning to that very spot during a week of vacation between Christmas and New Year. The image tells a story of a path leading with purpose through the heart of the woods. For me, the image pulsates with the slow, restful, restorative rhythm of vacation. I hope there are spaces in your lives where you feel slow, restful, restorative rhythms.

Let's consider for a moment the more typical movements and paths of our lives. I invite you to imagine your daily living (right now – this week, last week) as a car ride. Which of these sounds most like your movement along a day's path?

- Are you following a winding country road at a gentle speed, noticing all that is beautiful?
- Are you cruising fairly comfortably along a highway of routine, occasionally noticing your surroundings in your peripheral vision?
- Are you stop-and-go between traffic lights in a city, jerking forward and backward with each joy and frustration?
- Can you actually not picture where you've been in your movements between point A and point B, doing your best to not hydroplane through responsibilities and relationships?

God's love embraces each of us as we are – along any path and at any pace. Let's return to the words of the prophet Isaiah: *'Make ready the way of our God. Clear a straight path.'* **What does a cleared, straight path (the ready way) for God look like?**

John the Baptizer both embodied a response to this call to make ready the way (clearing the path for God) and passionately invited others to respond to the call. We heard, *“And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins.”*

John invited people into our very particular Judeo-Christian practice of spiritual decluttering. We call it repentance and forgiveness. We long to clear the path God travels between us each of us and each other whom we encounter. Our practice is that of acknowledging our wrongdoing, confessing it to God and to those we have hurt, longing and praying wholeheartedly for the forgiveness that is always available by grace, and then starting anew.

What does a cleared, straight path (the ready way) for God look like? It looks like soft, porous, gracious, responsive humans – soft, porous, gracious, responsive hearts. As Jesus taught us, the love of God IS the way – is the path. In the sacrament of baptism this morning, we promised to William that we will be channels of God’s way of love for him.

**Why, then would we make ready the way or clear a straight path for God?** The saying “Life is a journey, not a destination” has often been attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson. A version of that phrase actually first circulated in 1920 in the periodical *The Christian Advocate*, when theologian Lynn H. Hough published a Sunday school lesson outline based on a passage from Second Peter. Hough wrote of St. Peter: *“He wanted his friends to realize that life is a journey and not a destination; that the heart must be set upon those matters of character which are eternal and not upon those matters of sensation which pass away.”*

In an 1844 essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote this: *“To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.”* I’ll read that again. *“To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom.”*

*“To find the journey’s end in every step of the road.”* Some of us were raised in faith communities and family cultures that valued the journey – the efforts along the way (even as they came in fits and starts sometimes). And some of us were raised in faith communities in which arriving to an after-life of heaven was the only worthwhile goal. Life on Earth was a mere steppingstone. And some of us were raised in family cultures that emphasized competition to such a degree that winning the prize was the greatest or only worthwhile goal.

How strange an orientation for us to take when Jesus and his cousin John so passionately proclaimed a kingdom of God as possible in the present moment. So why would we make ready the way or clear a straight path for God? As a way of making the beloved community a reality right here and now.

**How can we (in this season of our lives) make ready the way or clear a straight path for God?** It comes when we embody the values we proclaim in this time of Advent. It comes when we make hope, peace, joy, and love. I invite you potentially find in your lives a copy of this children’s book, which is called *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*.

It was gifted to me around the age of seven or eight. And I cannot read this book without weeping. I read it to students a decade or two ago and I wept. I read it recently to my children recently and wept. I read it to my parents recently and wept.

This story happens during World War I in Appalachia. A mother attempts to care for her one child while the father is away, serving the country in the war. And they embody love together in the pace that is needed for them to move day by day, surviving and thriving in many ways.

And this is what we can do. We can embody the greatest love through each of our lives and find that God is in the path that connects each of our experiences to one another. So may we co-create with God's love a clear, straight path between and among all created beings; because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
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Mark 1:1-8, Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13