

December 4th, 2011 Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

It's one of the foundational stories of my life. And it is all about a crooked path.

There were a few of us who lived near to each other, and were going to begin school that Fall. And for some unknown reason, the parents got together and decided that it would be better for the kids to walk the one mile distance to the school, instead of riding on the school bus. Our parents were always trying to straighten us out about something, and apparently this was one of the things they thought would help with that.

So all the Dads got together and they cut a path through the woods. I can see that path today as though I were standing in front of it.

But it was not a straight path. In fact, looking back at it now I think the Dads were not very good at cutting a path. It really seemed to have some twists and turns that were not needed but I am probably wrong about that.

Here is my observation about the nature of paths:

When paths get used and worn down over time, its easy to forget about the rock or stump or fallen tree or brier patch that caused a path to take the course through a woods that it ended up taking. (There might be some life-metaphors for us to think about in that observation, but I'll leave that up to us to preach for ourselves.)

I look back on my walks to school on that path, and some other memories that I shared with my childhood friends as we had adventures in that big woods, and I cherish them all.

It wasn't what anyone would describe as a *straight* path. But it was *our* path. And it was the path shared with the families of my earliest years.

Make straight paths. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Isaiah's ancient words called people to prepare for what they were hoping for: The coming of God to save them.

And the ministry of John the Baptist, as it is remembered in the various gospel stories, issued a re-echoing of Isaiah's words-- a call for people to straighten out their lives in preparation for the coming of God.

In our modern lingo we seem to have joined in. Who hasn't heard or said:

You need to get your head on straight.

Hey kid, straighten up and fly right.

Or as a parent, what I need to do for my child is to get him or her to straightened out.

We understand the old word from the Prophets: "Make straight paths."

But I ask us: Is that a good thing? Always?

I wonder sometimes if part of what we strive to understand during this Advent season of spiritual preparation in our lives, is that God coming on earth is also about when paths are anything but, all straightened out. In fact, maybe that's the most important thing of all. At least I hope and pray that God coming to be with us includes a cherishing of the anything but completely straightened-out paths that are part of real life in this world of ours. Otherwise, I'm afraid that much of my life story is going to be rejected. And I'm not talking about the path to my school.

Making a straight path...

What is required if we make a straight path? What would it have meant for ancient people to do the necessary work of straightening out a path? How is it helpful for a path to be straight?

One of the things I remember from my limited experience with making a path: It is hard to make a straight path.

And as a lover of hikes on many and various paths, it might be kind of boring to walk on one that is perfectly straight all the time. Sometimes some curves and bends along the way can actually make the journey a lot more helpful and beautiful.

I mean, a little diversity is interesting...right? Some would say it even enriches the whole experience.

I was reminded recently that it can be a good thing for a church to share a bit of diversity in terms of its membership. Various cultural and life perspectives can enrich a faith community. Isn't that how the Kingdom of heaven will be? Diverse? Filled with all kinds of different people... even some surprises according to what Jesus taught.

Friends, there is a calling to make our paths straight as a preparation for the coming of the Lord. That is one of the main themes of a season like Advent.

But lets face it, no one... not one... will ever be completely straightened out in life. And for all of us, the invitation is about HOPING IN WHAT GOD ALONE CAN DO... and will do.

We're invited to HOPE in how the invitation of God is for everyone, and nobody is left out.

When it comes to who is invited to HOPE and PREPARE and be included as a part of God's family, I don't think anyone is left out.

And when it comes to having hope, neither should we leave anyone out.

"Make straight paths" is part of what it means to prepare for our Lord's coming.

"Repent!" is another part that John the Baptist included in his ministry to prepare the way. When was the last time we said "I'm sorry." to somebody? Because repenting is about restoring relationships with God. And it is also about restoring relationships with each other.

A next step on our paths- whether straight or crooked- can be taken together as we join in a

time of Confession and assurance of God's forgiveness, as part of our Communion service today.

May God help us to also take the next steps that can only happen on our own.