

“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.”

It is one of the magical places on earth. Whenever someone makes a film about the most beautiful places in the world, chances are it will appear. Virtually every time one of those 360 degree movies is made, there it is. It is one of the favorite subjects for television manufacturers to display on their screens, because it shows off the quality of their high definition images. Whether you are in Disney World or at an IMAX location, you see it extravagantly displayed. And the coolest thing of all? Every time we see it, virtually everyone here can say the same thing to the person next to them. “Hey, see that place? That’s where I live.”

Because we are surrounded by it, we have a tendency to forget that we live in the midst of one of the most stunning landscapes on the planet. While others travel across the globe to see what we have, it is natural for us to take it all for granted and to even become unaware of the wonder. We also miss the beauty because of the stress, anxiety and difficulty in our own lives, things that make it difficult to appreciate the landscape before us. That is why it is so important for each of us to regularly discard the burdens we are carrying and take a look around. It is another reason why we have the season of Advent.

I don’t know about the rest of you, but for me, living in this wonderful place, it is really difficult to relate to the phrase that we heard in both our first and last readings today. Leveling the mountains and raising the valleys does not sound like an

appealing image to me. I am intoxicated with this land and captivated by it specifically because of those exquisitely carved canyons and majestic mountains. The last thing I would want is to see Page turned into Kansas.

But just for a moment, think of what it would be like living here if that bridge was not right there. Think about life here without the big cut through the mountain over that hill. The truth is, some leveling and shifting of mountains and canyons makes all of our lives practical in this desert setting. I would go so far as to say that without those changes to the landscape, we too would more often see the dangers of this land rather than its beauty. From such a vantage point, it is not so difficult to understand why Isaiah, living in a desert very similar to ours, chose such a metaphor. It is also easy for us to understand why Baruch and Luke chose to quote Isaiah in today's lessons. Life in antiquity in the deserts of the Middle East would have been so much easier and safer had there been a cut in the impassable mountain here and a bridge over a dangerous canyon there. I suspect that it would also have made it so much easier to appreciate the beauty of a desert landscape as opposed to its many hazards.

Perhaps even more than our bridge and the cut, today's words make me think of the amazing engineering feat on interstate 15, just north of Mesquite. The Virgin River Gorge, like Zion and the Grand Canyon itself, is another spectacular example of the beauty of the Colorado Plateau, when desert river cuts through the limestone of the surrounding mountains. Traversing through it however, used to be as long and arduous as traveling the canyons of the desert where John the Baptist is found in today's Gospel. But back in the 1960's, the gentlemen for whom the building next door

is named, Paul Aiken, took a crew into that Gorge and built a road. During construction, the Virgin River had to be re-channeled twelve times. At the beginning of the process, a 50 foot long pile was driven into what Paul thought was bedrock. But by the next day, it had totally disappeared into the ground. Eventually, they would build six bridges across the river in the gorge. The final section of the road to be built was the Lower Gorge, the narrow part. It ended up costing 13.8 million dollars, making it the most expensive section of Interstate highway anywhere in the country until the completion of the so called Big Dig in Boston.

After that construction, Paul moved to Page to build the bridge right here and become a major part of this church. Paul told me that the workers did not like him too much, because he made them pour that cement over and over until there was no chance it would give. Those two projects completely changed the way humanity interacted with the desert. The Gorge went a long way to turning St. George into the thriving metropolis it is now. And the bridge made it possible for all of us to live comfortably in this exquisite place.

That is what the author of Luke is describing for us today. He, as well as Isaiah and Baruch, are painting an image of changes so radical that they will totally change the way people live, just like it did for us in our desert here. Those changes take place in preparation for the one who is to come, the one who will change even more. Notice however, that this announcement is not made by any of the rulers of the day, the ones who Luke carefully lists to place John and Jesus in historical context. We hear that it is in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar, one of the most ruthless despots the world has ever

known. We also learn that it was when Pilate was governor of Judea, a guy preserved in history by our own Nicene Creed, one immortalized as an arrogant, rash and heavy handed local tyrant. It is also the time of Herod's rule, no not the one in power when Jesus was born, but another Herod with a poor reputation. Luke's list is not limited to secular leaders either. He also tells us the names of the Jewish high priests of this time, Annas and Caiaphas, power brokers in their own right.

The fact that none of these leaders are involved in announcing the one who is to come, tells us much. Instead of a political or religious leader, we get the news from a wild-eyed, bug eating, long haired hippie. Out of the injustice and oppression of the age, represented by both secular and religious leaders, comes his voice of protest. Why do we hear the greatest news of history from someone who has dropped out of society? Because the goal of the power brokers of that day was the same as in any age, to protect the status quo, to perpetuate the system that has created comfort and wealth for them. Who else then, could announce the coming of great change other than a colorful character like John the Baptist? This becomes even more telling when we remember John's roots. His father Zechariah, the one we heard from in today's Canticle announcing his son, was a high priest, a representative of the system that is in great need of change. John the Baptist left his home and the entire Jewish religious system to proclaim something brand new.

The song that we heard Zechariah sing at John's birth sounds very much like the one Mary will sing in two weeks. Both suggest that the world needs to be flipped, that the high and mighty need to be knocked down off their thrones and the poor and the

suffering should be lifted up. They seek a leveling not only of the landscape, but of all of creation. They seek a major change, where the people on the bottom get lifted up with those valleys and the people on the top of those mountains get cut down just like the cut in our mountain down here.

Today's Gospel begins by listing those people who are responsible for keeping the world in its inverted position, a position opposite what we wait for with the realm of God. In their system, all the power and wealth stays on top of the mountain in their pockets. This is what John is protesting and his message is two fold. First, he tells us, make no mistake about it, the change is coming. The world is going to be flattened, things are going to get flipped from their present position.

The second point is one that many miss. That land leveling that we have discussed, the cutting of the mountains and the lifting of the valleys, is not a cataclysmic event produced by God. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John says, make his paths straight." It is the people who John calls to fill the valleys and lower the mountains and make the rough ways smooth. The people are the ones who are called to make the change a reality. The change is going to happen, but only if the people participate, only if they prepare the way for the one who is to come by starting the process.

Of course, John was not just talking to the people of the first century. He is a prophet after all. His words are meant to inform not just them, but every generation that is to come. Today, we are called to be ready for and to accept the unknown into our lives, as we talked about last week. But we are also called to prepare the way for that

change, to build the bridges and make the cuts in the mountain. It is not God who levels the playing field of the world we hear in today's Gospel, but it is us. We are called to be Paul Aiken. We are called to create highways of change.

How are we to do this? How are we to prepare his way? In John's word, we are to repent. But that word has little to do with the image we have built around it in the last century. The word repent literally means to turn around, to change. We, like John the Baptist, like Jesus, need to be ready to step out of the conformity of our culture. We need to recognize how the institutional government and the institutional church continue to work to preserve those institutions, as opposed to creating the realm of God. We need to be ready to flip both of them upside down and shake until they have dropped all of their abuses of power and we have created a world where all of us are on the same level field.

What today's Gospel made clear to first century listeners is that they were not supposed to be preparing the way for Caesar or Pilate or even Caiphas. They were to prepare the way for a person outside the power establishment of both the government and the church, the one who will break down the systems of unethical wealth distribution and power at the top. It is the same for all of us. We too, are not preparing the way for Ahmadinejad or Karzai or Obama. We are also not preparing the way for the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury. We are preparing the way for the one who sees the injustices of the institutional church and government and worked to change it.

We are called to see the same injustices in our own world and make the road smooth for all. We are called to turn the world's institutions upside down so that they

look more like the realm of God. We are called to see the absolute folly of perpetuating a war in Afghanistan that was going on even before the time of John the Baptist. No, Afghanistan is not Vietnam, it is much worse than that. It is a battle that has lasted thousands of years and we are not going to stop it by escalating the violence and killing more people. That is status quo thinking. That is changing the world's problems with the same tired solutions that haven't worked for thousands of years. If we are going to make lasting change, we, like Jesus, must go to the root of the problem and address it. We are called to break out of the same old institutional answers to these problems, fighting violence with violence, and instead realize that the root of that violence is the severe poverty faced by the majority of that population. Let us raise the valleys for those who have no running water and nothing to eat. That is what preparing the way for Jesus is all about.

I realize that such a solution is called naive by those in positions of power. But I also know that Jesus was regularly accused of the same, as was Gandhi, as was Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the same way, we are called to level the imbalances in the institution of our church. While here in the Diocese of Utah, we have made some progress in investing in the needs of the poor, our Diocesan budget still remains centered in protecting the institution rather than serving and reaching others. For example, the money we are spending as a diocese for church development this year is one-tenth what we are spending on finding and consecrating a new Bishop. Imagine what Jesus would have to say about that.

Whether we are talking about our individual lives, our community of St. David's, the church in general, or the power brokers of our country and the world, we need to not just prepare for something new and unknown, we need to create it. We need to lift every valley where the oppressed reside and chop down every mountain where power brokers hold firmly on to the status quo. Just like Nicholas did, we too must participate in breaking down the systems around us that create poverty and suffering for others.

So let us all repent, let us turn around the systems of injustice and suffering that are perpetuated by the institution. We need not be overwhelmed by this task, because as Paul Aiken showed us, the road across the canyon is poured one footing at a time. That is how the world gets turned right side up, that is how we prepare the way for the one who is to come, that is the way we make Christmas happen. Amen.