

## Sermon: Prepare the Way of the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Dec. 10, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Back in the summer of 2007, I had just graduated from the Knox College, in Toronto, with a freshly minted seminary degree, and an doe-eye optimism on Christian ministry. I spent six weeks in a French immersion course in the town of Chicoutimi, of the Saguenay region in Quebec. The course was actually imposed by the Presbytery of Montreal, as a precondition for employment before starting ministry at the congregation of Taiwanese & Robert Campbell Presbyterian Church.

Six weeks I spent, living with a local Quebecois family, and going to French classes at the Chicoutimi campus of the University of Quebec. It was a very interesting experience, learning and knowing that I could get by in French, if I absolutely have to—a skill I must admit had gradually faded over the years. Learning a language is one of those things—the more you speak the more you retain; the less you speak, well, you get me and my terribly broken French.

During my time there, I had driven a number of times through Highway 175, a long and winding road through a treacherous mountainous terrain, between Quebec City and Chicoutimi. Actually Highway 175 was undergoing major construction and expansion back then, with two roads roughly parallel to each other—the old existing winding road, and the spanking new highway that cuts straight through mountains and valleys. Travelling on that road, one got to behold the modern engineering marvel of highway construction, of manpower and equipments needed and used, to level the uneven ground, of mountain and hill made low and valley lifted up.

It reminded me of the words of Isaiah, in chapter 40, our Scriptural passage today, in verse 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."*

Isaiah, or more specifically the Second Isaiah, prophesied during the time of the Exile. The city of Jerusalem had fallen, the temple within was destroyed. The lucky few were taken to Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian Empire, or the present day Iraq, the rest were killed or scattered to the wind. Isaiah prophesied and envisioned a time of restoration, improbable as it sounds that one day soon, God will gather the defeated and scattered people, like a shepherd gathering the flock, and will bring them back to their home. One day God will make straight in the desert a highway, a Holy way of the Lord. Those who travel on it will neither thirst nor hunger, they will not be delayed or waylaid, for the redeemed and ransomed people of the Lord will go on straight, back home, back to God.

There will be much rejoicing enroute, as the prophet introduces to the people: "*Here is your God!*". There will be much celebration in the end, when the prophet proclaims to the people, "*See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him and his recompense before him.*" It will be marvellous, joyous, and glorious.

It is interesting to note in this vision of Isaiah, prior to the actual restoration, God would send a messenger, a voice in the wilderness, crying out not to draw attention, but to prepare the way. The job of this messenger is not to pave the way, for that is God's work. The job of this boundary figure is stand firm against the tide of the time, and to prepare the necessary condition, both internally and externally, for people to see and acknowledge the emergence of the way.

The classic example of such a voice in the wilderness is John the Baptist. Let me rephrase that, the writer of the Gospel of Mark saw John the baptizer in the river of Jordan, as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, as the voice in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Now John, a real boundary figure, living out his life in the wilderness of the Judean countryside, like a Nazarite who had set himself apart, as holy unto God. He wore cloth made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was consisted of locusts and wild honey, I guess you can say it's crunchy and sweet.

The people in Jerusalem and Judean countryside were flocking to him, to listen to his preaching, and be baptized by him. John himself understood he was not the One, the one to make the way, to gather the scattered people, and to bring them back to God. John, rightly and humbly, saw himself as preparing the way for the One, who is more powerful than

he, who is coming after him. The act of baptism was John's way of preparing for the necessary condition, both internal and external. For he baptized with water, but the One who was to come will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, and such a baptism will forever transform the world.

Now I want to stress, we do find the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in John, but that fulfillment is not necessarily singular nor unique. In the Christian faith, we profess Jesus Christ as the anointed, the Son of God, and as the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Godself who came down to be the way. However, in Judaism (and in Islam as well), Jesus was seen only as a teacher and a prophet of God, amongst a long line of other prophets who came only to prepare the way. This distinction is crucial, for they argue if God had really come down in the person of Jesus, then why is the world still broken as it is, and the promised everlasting peace and joy is thus far, far from being fulfilled.

I think it is a point worth considering, worth pondering over. I don't have an answer to that, for I too read the news and have seen images from this most recent round of violence, coming out of Israel and Gaza. But I will say what Jesus has done, his teaching, his ministry, his sacrifice on the cross, and being raised from the dead, continues to inspire men and women in every generation, to walk in the way, in preparation for the coming of the Lord.

In a way, we too are called to such a preparation for the way of the Lord, we too are called to walk it. Walking the way need not be some grandiose gestures of great sacrifice, it could be simply living one's life with integrity, with goodness and faithfulness.

I will leave you today with the story of Dr. Frances Kelsey, who has always inspired me as a good example of preparing and walking the way. She was a Canadian-American physician and pharmacologist who famously refused to authorize the drug Thalidomide for the market in the United States, during her time as a researcher of the Food and Drug Administration, or FDA. From the time of 1958-61, Thalidomide was widely prescribed in various parts of the world, in Europe, Canada, Japan and parts of Africa, as an effective sedative to help pregnant women dealing with morning sickness. USFDA was under immense public and political pressure to approve the drug, and the marching order was given to the research team to speed up the approval process.

Kelsey thought otherwise! She was most displeased by the repeated delay from the manufacturer in providing a comprehensive set of safety

data, an absolutely necessary one would think when approving a new drug. She did not succumb to groupthink—aligning her view to that of the group, at the expense of her own objectivity. Her insistence to stand firm proved to be the right course of action, as by mid 1961, evidence began to emerge, of horrifying deformity in newborn babies with small flipper like limbs. Thalidomide was eventually pulled off shelf, in the rest of the world, but not before its damage was already done.

By going against groupthink, standing firm simply by doing one's job well, Dr. Kelsey would eventually receive the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service in 1962, awarded to her by John F. Kennedy. More importantly, she continued to contribute to the strengthening of FDA oversight of pharmaceuticals, to the betterment of humanity.

Boundary figures, prophets, or messengers, what we call them, I give thanks to God for sending them, in preparation for that final coming, and in a blink of an eye, the world will be forever transformed, and the peace of the Lord is finally with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**