

Date: December 4, 2005

SUNDAY: Advent 2

SERMON: Straightening the Crooked Roads

Text(s): Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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When we traveled around Europe by car, we always carried our Michelin road maps, because they were extremely detailed, and by using them, we always could figure out where we were or where we wanted to go. Michelin thoughtfully marked what they called “scenic roads” with a bold green line. Through experience, we came to understand that their definition of a scenic road meant a narrow, serpentine road, with a rock wall on one side of the road, and a sheer drop on the other side, and full of hairpin turns where you almost met yourself coming round the other side. It was a little difficult if you were driving to gaze at the beautiful scenery when you were concentrating on avoiding the rock wall on one side or falling off the cliff on the other.

We have some roads like that in this country too. I remember one in particular down in the Smokey Mountains. It was one of those “scenic roads,” and there was one downhill stretch where it looked as though the road was going to run us straight into a rocky cliff face that loomed ahead of us. On the cliff face, someone had painted in big white letters, “Trust Jesus.” At the last minute, the road snaked around the end of that rock wall, with a heart-stopping drop on the other side, and as we came around the end of that wall, on the other side of it, someone had appropriately painted, “Praise Jesus.”

Now, of course, we don’t build roads like that. Mountains and cliffs aren’t what they used to be; we have earth-moving equipment. If the road-builders meet a hill, they remove it; if they encounter a mountain, they simply tunnel under it. Because of this tendency of old roads to be narrow and twisting, in the ancient times, whenever the king or emperor of a nation was going to pay a visit to his distant provinces, he usually sent a construction crew several years in

advance to build a new road on which he and his royal retinue could travel. The idea was to make a straight road, or at least as straight as possible. No expense was spared.

It is this practice of making a straight road for the ruler to travel on, that both our texts allude to this morning. Both the poetic oracle from the book of Isaiah, which many of us can probably almost sing from memory after years of singing or listening to Handel’s *Messiah*, where it forms the opening solo and chorus, and the beginning of Mark’s narrative of Jesus, where he quotes that passage from Isaiah, are addressed to communities in crisis. And in both, there is a call to get ready for a great event which is about to happen that will bring deliverance and restoration to the nation.

Isaiah’s oracle was addressed to the exiled people of Judea whose country and the holy city Jerusalem had been overrun by the Babylonian empire several generations earlier, and whose ancestors had been carried off into Babylon in a mass exile. The Temple of Solomon had been destroyed and the holy city had lain in ruins for many years. How could such a disaster have overtaken the people of God? Were they so wicked that God would punish them so severely? What hope did they have if God had abandoned them? How could they sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

To those exiles, this anonymous successor to the prophet Isaiah spoke a word of both hope and warning: “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her iniquity is pardoned. . . A voice cries, ‘In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’*”

Get ready. God is coming to save you. In the pit of despair, the seeds of redemption are sprouting. But you have to prepare the way for God’s coming. Straighten out all the crooked paths; level the hills, fill in the potholes, repair the broken bridges. How will you recognize the salvation that is coming to you if you don’t

prepare the way for it? God doesn't break covenants like human beings do. God's justice cannot be flaunted without consequences, but God is faithful even when the people of God are not. And God's glory will be revealed when you find yourselves back in your homeland. So get ready.

Mark's community, some six centuries later, was also facing a crisis of gigantic proportions. A new imperial power, Rome, had once again laid waste the holy city Jerusalem and the temple of God had once again been destroyed. Many within Mark's community saw this as a sign of the end of the world. Surely Jesus, whom they had come to believe was the Messiah, the anointed Savior sent by God to deliver his people, would return in glory to set things right. Surely, this time the world was really going to end. Surely this time all the wrongs in the world would be righted, and the bad guys would get their just desserts. (And of course, they all knew who the bad guys were: those of their fellow Jews who did not share their allegiance to Jesus and the Romans who had been crucified Jesus as a political subversive. The bad guys are always somebody else.)

So Mark wrote his gospel to give his community perspective on their time of severe crisis. He announces right at the beginning that he's got good news for them in the midst of all the bad news that they are experiencing in their daily lives. That's the title he gives to his work: *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God."* But at first, it seems like he's delivering more bad news. He reminds them, that before Jesus appeared and began his public ministry, John the Baptist had come to prepare the way for the Messiah by calling people to repent of their crookedness. It's Mark's way of saying, "Don't be too quick to think that all the bad guys are wearing Roman uniforms, and that we're all the good guys with perfectly clean hands who can expect to go straight to heaven while the rest of the world goes straight to hell"

Just as repentance was needed in John the Baptist's day in order for people to be able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, so Mark understands that repentance is needed now in order for his community to be able to recognize the signs of God's coming in deliverance in their own time of crisis.

This is a message that God's people always need to hear, but hardly ever want to hear, whether in exile in Babylon nearly three millennia ago, or as a dispossessed community under the heel of imperial Rome, or even as a group of rather more comfortable exiles in Brunswick, Maine. Nor are the crises we face any fewer than those faced by the Exiles in Babylon or Mark's beleaguered community in Palestine, though some of us may be better insulated from them, and so even less aware of how much we need to hear this message.

The past hundred years of human history has been, in all likelihood, the bloodiest of all human centuries, with no shortage of apocalyptic crises that have challenged the faith and hope of the people of God, from the trenches of Flanders to Stalin's purges to Hitler's atrocities to the nuclear threat of the Cold War, to the post-Cold War barbarities of genocides in Bosnia and Kosovo and Rwanda and Chechnya, or terrorism in New York or Madrid or Iraq. Our world is a place of very crooked roads. And they don't appear to be getting any straighter.

Nor is the crookedness limited to the international violence and bloodshed that has marred our times; that crookedness penetrates all our political and economic and religious institutions as well. We can't do without politics, but we probably don't labor under any illusions that our salvation is going to come from political leaders or political parties. What level of government, from the federal to the local doesn't feed the headlines nearly every week with stories of corruption or incompetence or malfeasance or abuse of trust? Some of us are probably cynical enough to doubt whether those political roads can

be straightened at all.

Nor, for all the hoopla about the phenomenon we've come to call economic globalization, are we certain that salvation is to be looked for in that sector. The corporate scandals of the past decade, if nothing else, have disabused us of that false hope. We know too much about human greed to fully trust that free trade and a booming economy is going to usher in the kingdom of God.

Religion is no straighter a road, and perhaps even more crooked than politics and economics, as the source of our salvation, because of its claims to absolute truth. More atrocities have been committed in the name of God than for just about any other cause, a fact that Sam Harris, in his bestselling book, *The End of Faith*, uses to justify his argument for the abolition of religion altogether. Religion, like politics and economics, is the work of human beings.

Political and economic and social and religious systems have only as much integrity as the people who maintain them. And the people who maintain them both shape and are shaped by the systems themselves. Crookedness becomes normal for both individual and institutional life.

The first word of both Isaiah and Mark to their communities in crisis was a word of good news, a word of hope, a word of consolation. Both began their message by saying, "God is coming to save us. God hasn't forgotten about us. God is going to restore us." But their second word is "But we've got to get ready. We've got to prepare the way. We've got to level the hills and fill in the potholes and straighten out the crooked roads. In short, we've got to repent."

Finding out where and how we are crooked is not a pleasant or an easy task. Our "cheatin' hearts" are our own greatest deceivers. Yet apart from such self-awareness, we can never escape the corrupting power of the crooked social institutions in which all of us are embedded.

Only much soul-searching and prayer, ruthless honesty, mutual confession and accountability within a community of other repenting people can enable us to identify the crooked places in our lives.

When I speak of repentance, I'm not talking about feeling guilty or ashamed of ourselves. Those emotions may or may not be part of repentance; repentance itself simply means changing direction, turning around. For some reason, men seem to have a harder time with this. I think it's related to the same gene that makes the male gender so reluctant to ask for directions when driving. But it's that change of direction that is the key. If I may return to our metaphor of road building, instead of taking the path of least resistance around the obstacle, we've got to do some heavy earth-moving to remove it, some going through instead of going around, some building of bridges instead of wandering off looking for the shallows. We have to go straight. And that means going straight in a concrete sense; we have to get straight in our relationships to other people, to money, to things, to politics, to religion. Repentance means making whatever concrete changes in our lives is demanded in order to straighten out that which is crooked in our own lives and in our society.

Such concrete changes may range from decisions we make about the level of consumerism we'll indulge in this Christmas to the way we invest our retirement portfolios to decisions to make our voices heard in the public forum, whether locally or nationally, advocating for justice for those in our society who are marginalized and powerless. The opportunities for straightening out crooked roads are nearly endless. And this is good news. The fact that we can change direction, that we can change our thinking, our behavior, our habits is good news. We're not locked in to the same old twisting paths of self-indulgence and self-interest and self-serving relationships. We can change. Old dogs can learn new tricks. We can become generous

by practicing generosity, we can become compassionate by acting compassionately, we can be just by working for justice. We can practice serving others rather than serving only ourselves. We can make an impact by intentionally becoming part of a community of other people who are also repenting and attempting to serve others rather than themselves. And this is liberating. Life becomes good and meaningful and fulfilling. We will discover ourselves becoming hopeful rather than cynical or depressed.

This is the work that Advent calls us to—this work of preparing the way of the Lord by straightening out all the crooked paths of our lives. It's only as we are willing to do this work that we will be able to hear God's voice speaking to us in the midst of our own crises, the same word spoken to Israel so long ago: "*Comfort, O comfort my people; tell them that their warfare is ended and their iniquity pardoned.*" That is God's saving word, the Advent promise that enables us to avoid the dead-end road of cynicism or the potholes of despair. It's a word that fills us with hope, and as St. Paul reminded us, "*We are saved in hope.*"