

Sermon, Dec. 9, 2018

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I remember driving one summer to visit my friends, the Reynolds, in backwoods Maine, and getting hopelessly lost. I stopped at one of those roadside eateries and asked the proprietor if he could give me directions. "Ma'am," he said, "you can't get they-ah from he-ah."

This, I now know, is a common New Englandism meaning not so much that there's no way from A to B, but that you're going in the wrong direction.

But it got me thinking about this morning's gospel reading, and all the construction projects being undertaken in the interests of getting Jesus to his destination. And nothing so simple as east ends, elevators, or seismic upgrades, either! Baruch and Luke have valleys being backfilled, mountains excavated, rubble leveled, and a highway being poured for the clear passage of God through the backwoods of planet Earth. So that God can get from "they-ah" to "he-ah."

Now historically, when Baruch (and Isaiah) wrote the passage from which Luke quotes, they had in mind the return of the Israelites to Judah from their exile in Babylon, and the intervention of a Persian (which is to say, Gentile!) king named Cyrus, who was friendly to the Israelites' cause. Now, we live in an utterly connected world, whether by the tangle of asphalt or fibre-optics or wireless whatever: so we

may need to be reminded that for the Israelites, separated from their homeland of Jerusalem by the topography of wilderness, clearing a path back home was no small matter. Isaiah and Baruch have some literal construction in mind.

But by the time we get to Luke, to the New Testament, we can be sure that the Evangelist is quoting Isaiah metaphorically. Preparing the way of the Lord – this bringing the valleys up, and mountains down, the straightening out of curves – is less about road construction than about making it possible for everybody to see. "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God," Luke says. Not just the ones who scrabbled over the heads of the rest of us to get to the top of heap, where there's a great vantage point; not just the ones who could afford the best seats on a winding parade route; but Everybody. All flesh. There's no bad seat in the house, because the playing field is finally level.

In other words, John the Baptist, long before St Paul preached his mission to the Gentiles, is announcing a universal imperative – salvation is for all to see. Not just Anglicans, not just Christians. And maybe (dare even we ask this?) not just people, but every sensate being, the whole created order. All flesh.

And if this is the case, then we need to take up this metaphor for ourselves, and ask this question: What do we need to do to make it possible for God to "get" to people? What are the impediments we need to clear away or straighten out to make it possible for God to warm the hearts, persuade the intellect, or fire the imaginations of people who have abandoned or, for that matter, never embraced a life of faith? Of the mass of people who lead (to quote Henry David Thoreau) "lives of quiet desperation."

I'm guessing there are as many answers to this question as there are people, and I'm tempted just to sit down and allow every person here to pick the one that bothers him or her the most, and get on with the business of dismantling it. But for those who might find it helpful to consider a few examples, let's

press on, understanding that we can barely hope to scratch the surface. Let me suggest, very briefly, five things that stand between God and the people God seeks for his own.

Number One. The lack of religious formation and memory in our society as a whole (we now have two entire generations who may never so much as have set foot in a church) means that a majority of our neighbours get their impressions of the Church from the media and the movies. Clergy are portrayed either as kindly, naïve and dithering old men, or as evil, wily, and diddling old men. These are the two tropes – comedy (and the joke is always on us) or scandal. The laity fare little better – remember the “church lady” on Saturday Night Live, or any number of “churchgoing characters” on prime-time who are psychologically impaired, pious to the point of nausea, or just plain mean.

Number Two. Some people are brave enough to overlook our media reputation, and to venture into our houses of worship. There God encounters a second impediment to connecting with these brave souls, and that is a roomful of “real Christians.” For we are too often a community with high, but spineless, rhetoric about justice, and mercy, and welcoming the other, and protecting the environment, and prayerfulness, and forgiveness, and God knows what else...

For you see, and this is Number Three, if people are leading “quietly desperate lives,” it is because life grinds them down – poverty, violence, sickness, and systems which are stacked against them – and there is no relief in sight. One of the most compelling impediments to belief in a good God is that pain and evil continue unabated – or worse, unchallenged by the People of God.

Number Four. Language. Interestingly enough, it is St Luke who will tell the story of Pentecost – when 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus, the apostles find themselves preaching to thousands of bystanders in “tongues” unknown to themselves, but completely comprehensible to their hearers. I believe that Christians of the 21st century need to consider the possibility that the language we typically use for God, and to describe what God has done for us in Christ, no longer “works” for people not schooled in it. Do we really need to describe our salvation in terms of a blood sacrifice for sin? Do we really need to think of God as a warrior? or as male at all? Is salvation really about “getting into heaven,” or not being consigned to some “eternal lake of fire?” Is it possible that our language for God serves as a great barrier between people and faith? And if it is, what are we going to do to fix it?

And Number Five. Science and biblical literalism. The honest truth is that many, many people (including people in this room) find the articles of our faith, and especially many of our biblical “big stories” hard to swallow in the face of scientific knowledge and discovery. I recently spoke with a family who openly stated that the reason they, and their friends, had given up on the Bible and Church was that they simply didn’t find many of our stories plausible. But “plausible” isn’t the point. The real question is, are they “true?” Do they speak truth to us? Do they teach us something we need to know? And if they do, then please God, let’s not demand literal belief as a condition for seeing God in these stories.

It isn’t God’s job to dismantle barriers we have erected – barriers like public opinion, our own failings, pain and evil, outmoded language, or biblical literalism. That is our job. So let’s figure out what the impediments are, and get to work. Let’s ensure that God can get from “they-ah” to “he-ah.

Or as Isaiah and Luke put it, let us prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight, that all flesh may see the salvation of God.