



Prepare the Way
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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I dread construction road signs when I am driving because I know that they mean for me to slow down and be aware of congested traffic, new lane configurations, orange cones and other barriers, heavy machinery and trucks entering the road, and the presence of road workers. When I see a “Road Work Ahead” sign I know there is the potential of getting late to my next appointment.

And yet at the same time, I am glad that there are plans for roads improvements. Besides giving work to people, road works are signs of better days to come when a one-lane road is expanded to two or even three lanes, streamlined crossroads, and multiple off and on ramps. When my mind is focused on the benefits that road works bring, I find that I can endure the present discomfort with more patience.

The gospel of Mark refers to the words of the prophet Isaiah when he invites his listeners to prepare a royal highway to the Lord. The words of Yahweh to Isaiah are words of encouragement and comfort: the punishing time is over; there are better days ahead. However, says Yahweh, there is work to do:

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. (Isaiah 40:3-4)

And the benefit of the work will be the contemplation of the glory of the Lord! (see v. 5)

The question is: what *is* the glory of the Lord?

Mark opens his gospel message with a bold announcement: The *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He opens his mouth to tell of that beginning which has no end, and the good news becomes better and better with each additional story line, each vignette of Jesus' life.

There is no end to that beginning even as Jesus encounters persecution, arrest, torture, and the shameful death of a criminal. In fact, his death is victory over death and his resurrection is the coronation and glorification of his life dedicated to the Truth of the Father. That Good News is ongoing and life producing. Hence, the glory of the Lord is the acknowledgment and celebration of the transformative power of the Lord.

Being struck in awe at the marvels of the Lord (in nature, in salvation history, in personal healing and redemption, in the works of mercy and compassion all around us) we witness to God's beauty and light. God is good and worthy of our trust and praise.

After that opening line, Mark tells us that the Good News of Jesus' life is anchored in the ancestral prophecy of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus *is* the Word of comfort to a suffering people.

We know we want to hear those comforting words when we look at all the suffering in the world today, all the hate and divisions, all the violence and trauma people experience and carry from generation to generation; when we consider the troubling prospective of an imminent ecological collapse;¹ when we experience in our own body and psyche the hurt we carry.

Yet, the comforting Word of Yahweh invites us into a conversation. It is spoken with the purpose of engaging us into a relationship: nobody can hear the Word of God and remain indifferent. It solicits a response; it challenges us to consider what kind of life we choose to have vis-a-vie the precepts and teachings of the Lord. The Way the Lord proposes will

¹ [Catastrophic climate 'doom loops' could start in just 15 years, new study warns | Live Science](#)

give us meaning and rest² and at the same time a life of integrity and opposition to anything that is life negating, to anything that opposes the divine plan will be encountered with resistance and repression. A cross is at the end of the road for a follower of Jesus but resurrection and life in him, with him, and through him, a life in the Spirit negates the negation of death.³

The bizarre ministry of John the Baptist calls people to a radical re-orientation of their life. The water baptism he performed was not about penance but about a call to repentance, that is to change one's mind. John was inviting people to see everything in life from a new perspective. Instead of concentrating on the past, on what they had done wrong or lost, John, like Isaiah, invited people to focus on God's promised future — a future he told them was about to dawn.

What would that future be like? Not even John could really envision it — he sent disciples to ask Jesus if he was the "one to come, or should we look for another?" We simply follow by faith.

In Advent, we sit in darkness and long for the light that Christ will bring. Yet, our waiting is not passive. As we lament the world's troubles we also live in hope and practice the faith: others will know that we are Christians by our love one song says poetically recalling Jesus' words.⁴

As an ancestor in the faith explained: "We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming he was seen on earth, dwelling among men; he himself testifies that they saw him and hated him. In the final coming all flesh will see the salvation of our God, and they will look on him whom they pierced. The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In his first coming our Lord came in our flesh and in our weakness; in this middle coming he comes in spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and majesty."⁵

² Mt 11:28-30

³ Mk 10:32-45; Jn 11:25-26

⁴ Jn 13:35

⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Sermon 5

Let us heed God's words of comfort for the Lord is ready to love, to heal, and to transform hearts. Let our life smooth out mountains and fill in valleys, and let all our neighbors know that we are Christians. Amen.