

A number of years ago I spoke with a man who, in his distress, looked at me and said, "I just want to go home." "Where is home" I asked. "I don't know" was the confused and lonely response. "I don't know."

Recently I spoke with a woman who thought she was going to go literally insane trying to deal with the insurance company, and the credit card company, and the online vendor, and the computer "help" line, and the medical billing department, and the sincere automated voice that said, "And if you want to rename your third child, press 1,542; if you want to speak to a person, please hang up and dial our office in India. . . ." "You know your universe has changed," she told me, "when going to the Department of Motor Vehicles is a cake walk." Then she said, "I feel like I don't belong in this world. It's like I'm in a foreign land with strange rules and I don't know how to play the game. I don't fit in this brave new world."

"Where's home," I asked the man. "I don't know," he replied.

When Isaiah proclaimed the words from today's text to the people, they were in exile, victims of a crushing defeat at the hands of Cyrus, and expatriated so there would be no uprising. Amid national depression and

individual despair, Isaiah hearkens back to that Exodus time when God's promise of freedom to a band of slaves was brought to pass and they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. And this new Exodus that Isaiah foretells would not be just any journey. No, God will raise the valleys and lower the mountains; God will make a straight, not a wandering, way in the desert so the people can return home. As William Willamon noted in a sermon on this text, it is the proclamation of a divine road construction project straight through the wilderness. It will be impossible to get lost.

This all sounds well and good, just the sort of pious stuff you expect to hear from a minister on Sunday morning, but which one of us here honestly believes in this divine construction project? God has had since the beginning of history, thank you very much, and the only new road construction we are hearing about are toll roads.

In one regard, this is all so very odd. Think about this, and I am not being facetious here. This brave new world we live in is thoughtfully designed for convenience, efficiency and leisure. Take, for example, computers. They are designed to make our lives easier and more efficient;

we can accomplish more in less time, freeing us up for "what's really important." And all we need to do to gain this advantage is to think like a computer; good programming is truly breathtaking in its austere, amoral and unemotional logic. But God help you the moment you run up against something that the computer is not programmed to handle. Truly friendly phone sales reps cannot negotiate a deviation that the computer has no code for. Your choices, and your life, are increasingly forced into the mold of efficiencies that dictated by the ones and zeros of programming logic. It's hard; it's hard to "reason" with a digital voice generated by a computer over a phone line, a voice that cannot reason but only use logic, and thus cannot make room for the individuality that is your life. It's hard; it's hard to be relational when we pump and pay with credit cards, self-check at the grocery store, order online without ever speaking with someone, and receive that order which was made in China, transported across the Pacific, trucked across the country and dropped off at the front door for us to discover the next time we actually use the front door and not the garage entrance. This brave new world we live in is thoughtfully designed for convenience, efficiency and leisure so we can have time for what is really important, and yet we find ourselves consistently inconvenienced, wasting our time, and spending our days enslaved by time-consuming demands we

buy into so we can live more efficiently. What a bizarre time of paradox we live in. When the global marketplace is brought down to the level of the individual we all too often experience inefficient efficiencies, inconvenient conveniences, and hectic leisure. The paradox of our time is that as we become more civilized the wilderness in which we live expands and grows more wild.

What is even more odd about this is that the very paradoxes we grudgingly participate in are mirrored by spiritual paradoxes we actually long to embrace. For Advent is a time of spiritual paradox: a time when we affirm that Christ has come and also that Christ has yet to come, a time when we recognize the fullness of Christ's revelation and yet await that very epiphany, a time when the reign of God is alive in our midst and a time when it is but a distant hope. This is a time of incomplete fullness, of here/not here, of now/not yet. There is a Way through the paradoxical civilized wilderness of our efficient world. There is a Way of the heart amid the remorseless landscape of computer logic. There is a Way of relationship in a world of see-no-one, hear-no-one, touch-no-one business as usual. There is a Way. It is the Way of active waiting, of dynamic stillness. It is the paradoxical Way of Advent.

Advent is a time of active waiting. This is a time when we are encouraged to be deeply introspective and to name our deepest humanity, to identify our truest identity. It's a time for us to clear the clutter from our spiritual and even secular landscapes to prepare a way for our God, a time to let go of all those burdens we carry and all the distortions that dis-shape us out of the image of God. It is a time when we reach into our own hearts by reaching out to the hearts of others. It is a time when we in stillness wait by actively preparing a way.

And we prepare this way by knowing that the One who is to come is already here. We do this by proclaiming a future whose time has already broken upon us in our past and present. We do this by being whole in our brokenness, healed in our woundedness, courageous in our fear. And as we do this, we become, WE become, the very reality of hope, we become the very reality of hope we are waiting for. As Stanley Hauerwas once noted, we become this reality when we claim our identity as a people who "can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the tough, risk love when it may not be returned,

because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality."¹

The fruit celebrating Advent, the result of this spiritual journey, as individuals and as an incarnate community, is that we learn to be a source of radical hope, to witness to the new identity and vision, the new way of life that has become a social reality in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit amid the efficient wilderness of our secular age. The persistent problem we face each year as Christmas approaches is not how to keep ourselves and the church from being out of touch with the world, but how to keep the world from distracting us from our purpose of cultivating the people of God. As sign, foretaste, agent, and instrument of God's reconciling love and forgiveness, the church makes Jesus Christ visible in the world; WE make Jesus Christ visible in the world. The church is a social reality that continually engages in the practices that cultivate us as a people of truth, peace, wholeness, and holiness. The forming of Christian community is therefore not an option but the very lifestyle and

¹ Hauwerwas, Stanley; *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press; 1992; page 118

vocation of the church. And at Advent, at Advent, we reclaim the paradox of active waiting, of that calls us to this vocation.²

Thus, in our civilized wilderness, to prepare a way for the Lord to come to you in your time of active waiting, your time of dynamic stillness, I encourage you to do three things between now and Christmas. First, set aside a deliberate time of prayer each day. It need not be a long time; 10 – 15 minutes would be enough. Make that time sacrosanct and stick to it. Clear the ear of your heart of the external clamor and listen, listen for the voice of comfort, of peace, of home that comes to you in your efficient wilderness.

Second I encourage you to be a voice, a presence, in our society's efficient wilderness. I encourage you to reach into your own heart by reaching out to the heart of another. Find one thing you can do this holiday season that reaches beyond yourself. It may be claiming one of the angels on the Giving Tree outside the sanctuary and buying the gift that is named there for someone in metro Denver who cannot afford the simplest thing. It may be serving a meal in a soup kitchen or even having your Christmas

² The preceding paragraph is largely inspired by *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Darrell L. Guder, editor; page 153

meal among the homeless as you serve them in one of the area places that serves such meals on Christmas day. It may be sending a card to someone at work who looks to be struggling in her own wilderness and who simply needs a word of caring support. Whatever it is, be the incarnation of hope in another's wilderness.

Finally, I ask you challenge yourself to live in the paradoxical space of the Here/Not Here, the Now/Not Yet, that place where Christ has already come and is yet coming, that place that acknowledges Christ's long ago birth and proclaims his future return in love and mercy. And of the three requests this is the one that is most nebulous and that will be the easiest to blow off because it is so hard to know what this means. How do we live so that we at once live hope and also embody the very thing we hope for? How do we have faith so that we at once live as witness to the fullness of God already among us and also work for that fullness so that it may become a reality through us? How do we actively wait? I ask you to sit with these questions and ponder them in your heart. Live in the paradoxical space of Advent. And if you want to review these questions, this sermon will be posted on the church's website by tomorrow morning.

There is comfort for us, my people, says our God. God speaks tenderly to us and cries to us that our struggles are over, that our broken choices are pardoned, and that in our civilized wilderness we can build a highway for our God. Enter the paradox that is this season, the active stillness that prepares a Way for him who has come and is yet to come, and that calls us to participate in fearful confidence to the work of peace on earth, goodwill to all people. May the incarnation of love be born(e) in us this day. Amen and amen.