

Sermon followed by Service

December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:3-5

³ *A voice of one calling:*

*“In the desert prepare the way for the LORD;
make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

⁵ *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all mankind together will see it.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

Do you hear “the voice?” Do you hear the “wow” of Jesus’ birth? Or do you just hear the noise? There’s a lot of noise this season, isn’t there? Some of it might start nice: bells ringing, and carols singing. Some of it might start fun: children shaking packages, the sounds of cooking in the kitchen, and then the “wow” when gifts are opened and food is served. But some of the noise, more and more of the noise, is arguing, fighting, grinchy, and scrooging. So much noise, it can be hard to hear the voice and the wow of Jesus’ birth.

In your noisy, noisy world, hear this: **“a voice of one calling: “in the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.”** In the days of Isaiah when a king wanted to travel, he wanted a good road.

So out would go his messengers, “Prepare the way for the king.” Potholes were filled; bumps were smoothed. Hilltops were knocked down, valleys filled in. Wandering roads were made straight. The king was coming and nothing could be allowed to get in the way of the coming king; nothing could be allowed to slow down the coming king.

Now the voice in our lesson wasn’t just “Prepare the way for the King” it was “**Prepare the way for the LORD!**” God was coming ... **and the glory of the LORD would be revealed!** When you think of the glory of the LORD, what do you think of? We might think of his awesome power, his awesome creation stretching out way past the stars; we might think of God in all his holiness shining brighter than the sun. And that’s all part of God’s glory; but the special glory of the LORD isn’t just seen in his power and holiness; the special glory of the LORD isn’t just God over us; the special glory of the LORD is God for us and with us - God stepping into history and coming to help his people!

Think of when God’s people were slaves in Egypt, when God stepped into history, the glory of the LORD appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. Then when God’s people were starving in the Sinai desert, God again stepped into history and the glory of the LORD appeared when he promised manna and quail for his people. And when God’s people rebelled against Moses, God stepped in, he showed his glory and saved Moses. At the tabernacle in the desert, at the temple in Jerusalem, God stepped in and showed his glory. And then 1000 years later on Christmas

Eve, the glory of the Lord lit up the sky outside of Bethlehem and the angels told the shepherds that God had stepped into this world, our Savior was born. The glory of the Lord most often appeared as a bright light that would make people stop in their tracks and think, “God is here.” Not just to “wow” his people. The glory of the LORD was God’s sign he was stepping into history to save his people.

So in our lesson when Isaiah prophesies, “**the glory of the LORD will be revealed**,” Isaiah was saying, God is coming to step in and save us. Isaiah was preaching an Advent sermon. God would come and save his people. First, God would step in and take a man named Cyrus and make him king over the Babylonian empire, the Babylonian empire that would destroy Jerusalem and take God’s people captive. God would use great King Cyrus as his servant to set his people free and send them back home to Jerusalem.

That was part of Isaiah’s Advent sermon - God was coming to set his people free! But that wasn’t all of Isaiah’s sermon. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell us the voice calling out in the wilderness was John the Baptist. Our lesson isn’t just about God coming with servant King Cyrus; it is especially about God coming with his servant King Jesus Christ.

“And the glory of the LORD will be revealed.” Not just with a bright light. Not just through a man like Moses or Cyrus. This time God himself would step into our history as one of us. How? - as the miracle baby born of a virgin. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, He would bring peace, and justice and

righteousness to our world. He would be God's perfect obedient servant; the kind of servants we're supposed to be, but aren't. He would be God's specially chosen victim to carry our sin and die our death. He would be God's forever Prince of Peace who would rule over death and give us God's peace forever. In Jesus Christ, the glory of the Lord - not just the light of God, but the love of God - would be revealed. God would step in and intervene in the natural course of history and save his people from their sins.

That's in the past. What about today? The glory of the Lord will be revealed again. We're now living in the advent season of Christ's second coming. God will again step into the normal course of history to save his people. Christ will come again and he'll deliver us out of this world to live with him in heaven.

And so a voice calls out: **“in the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.”** What does that mean for us? God is not telling us to go out and fix our roads. Jesus doesn't need roads; he didn't come in on a road at Christmas; he doesn't come in on a road today; and he won't be coming in on a road when he comes back. So what is God saying?

John the Baptist took the words of our lesson and preached them with this one word, **“REPENT.”** Change your mind and change your life. Prepare to meet your Lord. Take a look at your life; take a look into your heart. What kind of road are you giving Jesus in your heart and mind? What's in there you don't

want Jesus to see? What does Jesus want in your heart but it's not there?

We have some road construction to do in here, don't we? What are some of the potholes - holes in our heart - we face this time of year? With all the sales and commercials ... with the world around telling us: "You need more; you need more, you need more" it can be easy to have a hole in our heart that says: "I need more stuff; and if I don't get what I want, I can't be happy." Like getting stuff is more important than having Jesus and sharing Jesus.

What else can get in the way of Jesus this time of year? Oh, we can be so busy. Christmas lights and shopping and parties and on and on. Sometimes we fill our calendars so full, Jesus can't fit in (we don't let Jesus fit in); and then we get so stressed people around us can't see Jesus in us either. Or maybe what gets in the way of Jesus is the family get-together packed with years of baggage and feuds - we just wish they would let go, while we hold on.

What in your life gets in the way of Jesus filling your heart? What gets in the way of God showing his glory, his love and his grace through you? Those are the places to clear the way and let Jesus in. Let Jesus in and he will fill in those holes with peace and forgiveness and all the riches of God's love. And then what? Perhaps Christmas will feel a little less noisy and we'll better hear and better voice the wow of Jesus' birth.

One more thought. What might be some things here at St. John that can get in the way of Jesus? How can we clear the way, make it easier to see the glory of our LORD here? I was talking with someone this past week, someone whose life has always been filled with noise, a lot of noise getting in the way of Jesus. He lives out of state now. He talked about something we've been talking about - friendliness and welcome. He said where he lives now, people are friendly and people are welcoming. To a point. The people are so busy and so tight with their friends that they have little to no room to let new people in as friends. Sound familiar? It could, it should; I hear the same thing in our part of the world. Do you see the hole, the opportunity there? It's great to be friendly, but to be a friend? That just might clear the way and be the way for Jesus to do his thing.

One more thought. Oops. I already said that. Did you notice the promise in our lesson? Isaiah didn't just say "do"; Isaiah also said it will be done. Clear the way for Jesus, and he will work his blessing! **"Prepare the way for the LORD; and the glory of the LORD will be revealed!" Amen.**

SERVICE OF THE WORD

IN OUR WORLD TODAY ... we hear so much noise that gets in the way of people hearing Jesus. Our world (and hearts) are filled with so many obstacles getting in the way of Jesus.

IN OUR WORSHIP TODAY ... we hear the voice that calls us to be ready for Jesus, and we hear God's promise that he will show his glory in Jesus!

INVOCATION

M: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

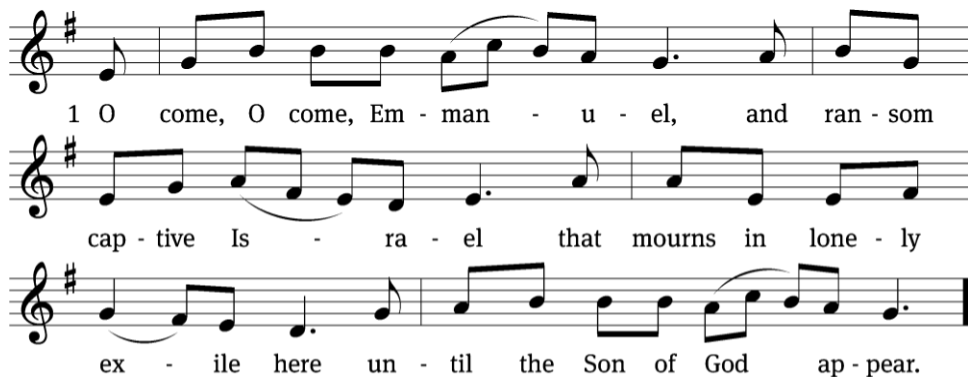
C: **Amen.**

CONFESSION OF SINS AND LIGHTING RITE

M: When God created the world, he made the crown of his creation - the human race - in his image (Genesis 1:26). Perfect people lived in a perfect world in a perfect relationship with God.

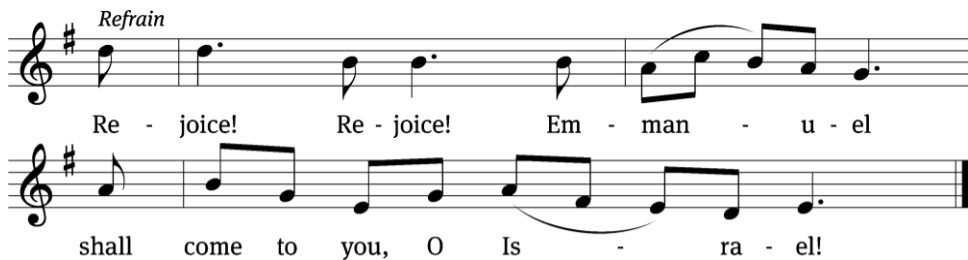
C: **But mankind rebelled against God, bringing sin into the world and death to all. God declared the wages of sin to be death (Romans 6:23). We too are guilty, and we confess our sinful thoughts, words, and actions.**

M: However, God - who is Love - did not want to be separated from his children forever. He promised a Savior who would bear the punishment for sin, defeat the devil, and break the bonds of death.



1 O come, O come, Em - man - u - el, and ran - som
cap - tive Is - ra - el that mourns in lone - ly
ex - ile here un - til the Son of God ap - pear.

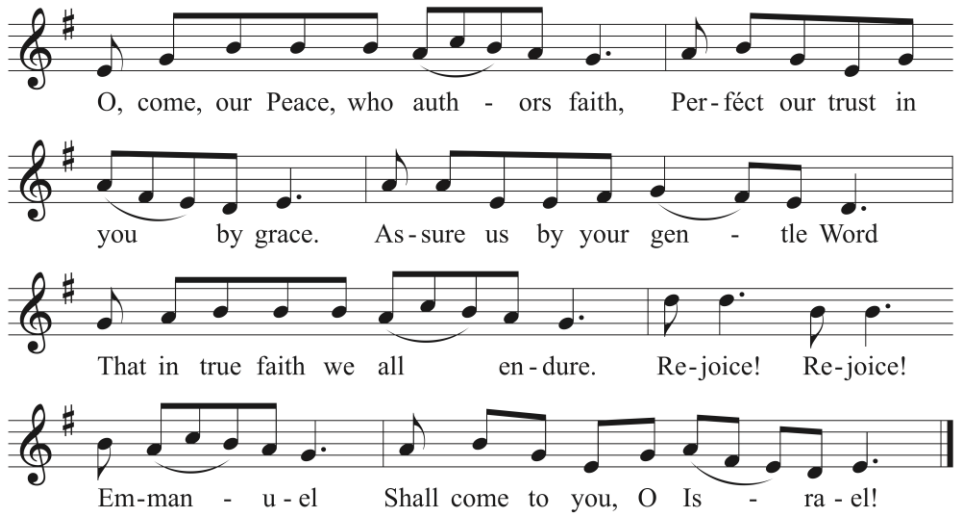
Refrain



Re - joice! Re - joice! Em - man - u - el
shall come to you, O Is - ra - el!

M: When the time had fully come, God sent his Son. Jesus, our Savior, has paid the ransom for your debt; your sins are forgiven (Galatians 4:4,5). In view of God's mercy, today we light the peace candle. Jesus tells us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).

C: **Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).**



O, come, our Peace, who auth - ors faith, Per - fect our trust in
you by grace. As - sure us by your gen - tle Word
That in true faith we all en - dure. Re - joice! Re - joice!
Em - man - u - el Shall come to you, O Is - ra - el!

M: In the peace of God we go to the world - to our friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors. We regard no one from a worldly point of view. If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 16-18).

C: God has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. Jesus, who had no sin, became sin for us; in him we have become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

Refrain

Re - jice! Re - jice! Em - man - u - el
shall come to you, O Is - ra - el!

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp). The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics 'Re - jice! Re - jice! Em - man - u - el' are written below the first staff. The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics 'shall come to you, O Is - ra - el!'. The piece ends with a double bar line.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to prepare the way for your only Son. By his coming, give us strength in our conflicts, and shed light on our path through the darkness of this world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

FIRST READING

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

CHOIR

“The Lord Almighty Reigns”

*There’s an endless song waiting to be sung
With the voice of every tribe, the sound of every tongue
When the bride of Christ on that day of days
Brings with joy unto the land a multitude of praise
Like the roar of mighty seas and rolls of thunder Hear His people sing*

Refrain

*Hallelujah, hallelujah For the Lord Almighty reigns
Hallelujah, hallelujah For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns*

*We will join the feast, rest from battles won
Tell with great rejoicing all the wonders God has done
Like the roar of mighty seas and rolls of thunder All the church will sing **Refrain***

*Certain of that day, Christ we will proclaim
Oh, that more would share the prize-Salvation in His name.
Then greater will the anthem ring, a mighty chorus rising to the King: **Refrain***

SECOND READING

2 Peter 3:8–14

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 3:4,6

Alleluia. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. And all people will see God's salvation. Alleluia.

GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' ”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise be to you, O Christ!**

APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY

"On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry"

Hymn 316

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh;
come, then, and listen, for he brings good news about the King of kings.

Then cleansed be ev'ry life from sin and furnished for a Guest within,
and let us all our hearts prepare for Christ to come and enter there.

We hail you as our Savior, Lord, our refuge and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away like flow'rs that wither and decay.

Stretch forth your hand, our health restore, and lift us up to fall no more;
O make your face on us to shine, and fill the world with love divine.

All praise to you, eternal Son, whose advent has our freedom won,
whom with the Father we adore and Holy Spirit evermore.

SERMON

Isaiah 40:3-6

HYMN

"Prepare the Royal Highway"

Hymn 302

Prepare the royal highway; the King of kings is near!
Let ev'ry hill and valley a level road appear!
Then greet the King of glory, foretold in sacred story:
Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's Word!

God's people, see him coming: your own eternal King!
Palm branches strew before him! Spread garments! Shout and sing!
God's promise will not fail you! No more shall doubt assail you!
Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's Word!

Then fling the gates wide open to greet your promised King!
Your King, yet ev'ry nation its tribute too should bring.
All lands, bow down before him! All nations, now adore him!
Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's Word!

His is no earthly kingdom; it comes from heav'n above.
His rule is peace and freedom and justice, truth, and love.
So let your praise be sounding for kindness so abounding:
Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's Word!

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

M: Eternal Father, throughout the centuries you repeated and affirmed your promise to send the offspring of the woman to crush the serpent's head. Through your prophets of old, you continually directed the eyes of your people to the advent of their Savior.

C: We praise you, O Lord, for keeping your promise and sending your Son to destroy the works of the devil.

M: As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our King, use your mighty Word to shatter our pride and to rouse us from spiritual slumber and apathy.

C: Move us to take to heart the words of John: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

M: You sent your Son to redeem us from sin. Let this good news be our joy and strength. Use it to cheer the lonely, encourage the fearful, and give hope to the despairing. In these days before Christmas, spare us from the stress of deadlines and the frenzy of commercialism.

C: Fill our lives with the message of your peace and the music of your grace.

M: Direct our eyes not only to the manger but also to the skies, where we will see your Son coming again, not as a lowly child but as the Lord of lords.

C: Lift up our hearts in joyful anticipation of that day.

Special prayers and intercessions may follow.

M: Hear us, Lord, as we bring you our private petitions.

Silent prayer.

M: Come quickly, Lord Jesus, in your grace, in your power, and in your glory.

C: Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

M: O Lord God, our heavenly Father, pour out the Holy Spirit on your faithful people. Keep us strong in your grace and truth, protect and comfort us in all temptation, and bestow on us your saving peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

BLESSING

M: Brothers and sisters, go in peace. Live in harmony with one another. Serve the Lord with gladness.

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. **Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

"The Advent of Our King"
Hymn 309

The advent of our King our prayers must now employ,
and we must hymns of welcome sing in strains of holy joy.

The everlasting Son, in flesh content to be,
himself a servant's form puts on to set his servants free.

O Zion's daughter, rise to meet your lowly King,
nor let a faithless heart despise the peace he comes to bring.

As judge, on clouds of light, he soon will come again
and his true members all unite with him in heav'n to reign.

Before the dawning day let sin's dark deeds be gone,
the old self all be put away, the new self now put on.

All glory to the Son, who comes to set us free,
with Father, Spirit, ever one through all eternity.

OFFERING

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Join Us in Worship This Holiday Season!

Advent Wednesdays

December 13 & 20

3:30 and 6:30 pm

Advent Dinners at 4:30 pm

Sunday, December 17 - **Children's Christmas Service** at 3 pm

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service - 4 and 7 pm

Christmas Day Festival Service - 9 am

New Year's Eve Service/Lord's Supper - 5 pm

Join us for our annual Game Night after the service!

Making Guests Feel Comfortable in Church

1st Time Guests:

Provide convenient parking spaces;

Greet with enthusiasm;

Have a conversation (ex., ask questions, etc.) before and after the service;

Provide a nametag;

Sit with them;

Introduce them to other church members;

Ask them to complete the attendance registry by example and/or by handing it to them;

Show them around the church;

Invite them downstairs for fellowship and Bible study and bring them down, personally;

Ask them for feedback about their visit;

Send them a follow-up communication (ex., card/email);

Provide a Welcome Packet;

Create an Exit Team

Recurring Guests:

Welcome back;

Use name in conversation;

Provide a permanent nametag;

Thank them for coming and express excitement for their attendance;

Introduce them to other members;

Invite them to Bible Study and ask them to sit with you;

Invite them to other events/service opportunities/women's groups;

Find out about children; show them around the school; introduce to teachers;

Ask for feedback/suggestions;

Bring Welcome gift/basket;

Ask them if they want to talk to Pastor/have Pastor contact them

BIC/New Member Class:

Ask them if they have specific needs that would make it easier to attend BIC (ex., childcare);

Join them in class;

Encourage participation (ex., bring treats);

Remind them membership doesn't end with church attendance;

Have a luncheon/dinner;

Follow up/ask for feedback;

Identify interests (roles and holes?);

Provide a Member Directory;

Introduce in church

Presenter Question – Is there a sign for guests to show them what door to use?