

Second Sunday of Advent – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – December 10, 2017
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My father's family came to Memphis about a hundred years ago as employees of Virginia Bridge and Iron Company. They were brought here to assist in the construction of the Harahan Bridge which spans the Mississippi River and, to this day, accommodates the numerous freight cars which ride the rails into and out of Memphis each day. For years before the Memphis-Arkansas or the Hernando de Soto bridges were built, cars could travel on cantilevered roadways on the sides of the Harahan Bridge. Now those old roadways are traveled by bicycles and pedestrians in what has come to be called the Big River Crossing. For a city with such a dramatic river view – and with such potential just on the other side of the river – our bridges are important connections. They are among the most travelled – and the most photographed – structures in the area. Whether made of stone or steel, bridges have brought people together for centuries, crossing rivers and valleys that used to be insurmountable obstacles.

That, in a sense, is what the prophet Isaiah was talking about in our first reading. The voice of one crying out: “In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!” Isaiah encouraged the people living in exile in Babylon to remove any obstacle between them and the promised land – between life among the foreigners and life at home. He issued a clarion call back to Jerusalem – back to a life of fidelity to the Lord. And along the journey, he challenged them to fill every valley, make low every hill and mountain – in short, to make the road back to God as smooth and as straight as possible for all who would follow. It may seem that Isaiah was encouraging the people of Israel to build the bridges to God that are necessary – but in reality, he was asking much more than that.

You see, when we are building a road and encounter a deep valley, we bring in engineers and steel companies and laborers and build a bridge over the valley. When we encounter a mountain, we construct the road around it, if possible, or we shave a bit off the side, or we tunnel through. That's our solution to the problems of road construction imposed by geography – find the easiest way to make it work. But that is not what Isaiah was proposing. When you encounter a valley, Isaiah said, fill it in. When you encounter a mountain, level it. Don't just walk around it or take a short cut over or through it – change the geography, even though that will take an awful lot of work. If you want to get to Arkansas, Isaiah is telling us, fill in the Mississippi River. If you want to get to California, level the Rocky Mountains. No wonder Isaiah wasn't especially popular in his time!

It is also no wonder that when John the Baptist appeared on the scene, he reminded a lot of people of Isaiah. Yes, he came upon the scene as a voice crying out in the wilderness, but the similarity went much deeper. Everyone was trying to make a path to God – but they chose different methods. The Pharisees, for example, were among those advocating taking short cuts – building bridges over valleys and routing the roads around the mountains. We don't usually think of the Pharisees as taking short cuts – we see them imposing the burdens of ritual observance. When you think about it, however, ritual observance – going through the motions, if you will – is much easier than observance from the heart. Anyone with enough will power can observe the Sabbath rules, but it takes someone dedicated to discipleship to actually take the reasons behind those rules to heart – to be transformed from one living technically pure to one whose heart is authentically pure.

That's why his contemporaries found John the Baptist to be so refreshing, and so challenging. He wasn't asking them to do something else, to avoid another kind of food or to say another set of prayers. John was challenging all who listened to him to repent – to fill in the valleys of sin in their lives with the love of God, to eradicate the mountains of pride they had accumulated and to rest comfortably in their identity as children of God. John didn't ask those who listened to him to do something else, but to be something else. He was inviting them to real change. His call to prepare the way of the Lord was not a call to gloss over their sin or to detour around their pride, but to remove them entirely. And his call to us is the same.

In this season of Advent, in this time of twinkling lights and wrapping paper and lots of artificial decoration, the temptation to paper over a problem, to avoid dealing with the touchy family situation, the temptation to pretend that everything is fine rather than dealing with what isn't can be overwhelming. John calls us to another approach. He invites us to face the situation as it is and to do the hard work of filling in valleys and leveling mountains. He invites us not to pretend to have a deep and abiding relationship with God, but to actually do the work to have one. He asks us not to paper over a problem but to work to solve it. And that requires repentance and change. If we are truly to prepare the way of the Lord, then we must change our hearts, we must invite God in. As those who were baptized by John realized, this begins with acknowledging our sins. We cannot hope to put our sinfulness behind us until we are humble enough to admit that there are valleys and mountains we cannot overcome on our own. Advent is the perfect time to do the work of repentance, to do the work of a disciple. Advent is the perfect time to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation – to acknowledge our sins and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Pharisees detour around mountains of pride and selfishness – we are called to level them, to make straight the paths of the Lord.