

Meanwhile

Isaiah 40:3-5

January 18, 2015

I pray ... a lot.

I pray for my children and my grandchildren, for my mother and for Lynne's mother, and for Lynne.

I pray for this church -- for energy, for passion, for spirit, for the strong presence of God's spirit in us and among us. I pray for you, for the people of this church family, for your needs and your concerns.

I pray for this world. I ask God to thwart the plans of people bent on violence. I ask God to help people see past their differences and care about each other. I pray for reconciliation. I pray for illumination. I pray for peace. I pray for God's light to shine in our darkness!

I pray a lot. And I suffer ... a lot.

Now don't get me wrong. I have been blessed in my life, extraordinarily blessed, well beyond what I could have expected and well beyond what I deserve. I have been blessed with diverse and rich experiences, with the privilege of doing a job I love, with dedicated colleagues and good friends, with more than I need and much of what I want, and I have been blessed with a wife well beyond what I deserve.

But I have suffered, too. I don't need to go into detail, but I have known grief and heartbreak and regret in my life. But when I speak of suffering -- a lot -- I mean more than personal suffering. I mean the suffering of which I spoke last Sunday, the long suffering we share as human beings, the suffering of living together in a world in which we do harm and injury to each other, willfully or carelessly, a world plagued by violence and inequality and injustice and suffering. "We" suffer, because of what "we" do.

I suffer and I pray. Does it make a difference? Do my prayers make a difference? Does God answer? Do people change? Do situations change? Does the world change?

Who am I to say? Because prayer is not a magical incantation -- do it right and you get the desired result. Prayer is not about manipulation, but about relationship, not about control, but about trust. In prayer, I trust myself and all those I love into God's loving care. I ask God to be God. I ask God to do what God already intends to do -- to be kind and merciful and good.

I pray, but much of what I ask for does not happen or has not happened yet. I am still waiting, still suffering, still praying. So what do I have? I have what I started with -- prayer itself, faith itself, believing that God is God, that God is good, that God will do what God has promised, that God will come.

That's what we have. We have faith. We have hope. We wait for God to come. We wait for God to say, "Long enough. My people have suffered long enough."

And meanwhile?

Meanwhile, we pray. And? It's the "and" that matters! It's the "and" that makes prayer more than just a "cop out," but instead a partnership with God. Listen again to Isaiah. Listen again to the voice cry out:

Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!

The Lord is coming, but the way must be prepared. By whom? Who prepares the way for the Lord? We do! Meanwhile, we prepare a road for the Lord.

Isn't that comforting? Isn't it comforting that we have something to do? We have something to do! Something that matters!

*Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!
Clear the way in the desert for God!*

Why "in the wilderness?" Why do we prepare a road for the Lord "in the wilderness?" That's hard to say for sure, but I have a few thoughts.

We prepare a road in the wilderness because God doesn't come through the "front door." God doesn't make an appearance in places of power or prestige. God comes by a different way. So that's where and how we make things ready for God -- in out of the way places, under the radar, from the outside, in the wilderness. We do what we do to prepare the way for the Lord, not to be noticed, not to be praised, not to capture the public's attention, but just to do it.

And, secondly, the "desert" is often where God chooses to meet God's people. It was in the desert that a group of Hebrew slaves became God's people, learned to follow where God leads, learned to depend utterly on God -- for food, for protection, for wisdom, for life itself.

In "desert" places there is less to distract, less to delude. In "desert" places, we recognize our vulnerability, our fragility, our need for God not just in moments of crisis but in each and every moment. The desert is not the only place where God speaks, but sometimes it is the place we listen.

*Prepare in the wilderness a road for the Lord!
Clear the way in the desert for God!
Fill every valley;
level every mountain.*

We have something to do ... something big! Fill every valley. Level every mountain. We are talking about major re-landscaping! We are talking about changing the way the world is!

It's our job to make the rough country smooth. In order to make it passable for God? What do you think? No, we make the rough country smooth to make it accessible for people, for all the people, so all the people can get there to see it when the glory of the Lord is revealed! It's our job to remove the obstacles, the rough places, the difficult landscapes in our lives, that make it harder for people to see God.

Fill every valley ... every valley of pain, every valley of doubt, every valley of the shadow of death. Fill it! Fill the hole, the awful hole in people's souls, the terrible hole in people's hearts. Smooth the rough places. Soothe the pain. Fill the emptiness. Lift up the ones who have fallen down. Lift up the ones who have been pushed down.

And level every mountain ... every mountain of hatred, every mountain of haughtiness, every mountain of greed. Tear down the high places of pride. Tear down the high places of self-absorption. Tear down the high places of condescension.

Fill every valley. Level every mountain. We have something to do. We have something to do. Isn't that comforting?