

Ten years ago, the people of this congregation were preparing the way of the Lord.

Our magnificent little old building was being renovated, and the faithful here made a couple of significant decisions.

One was to retrofit an elevator just inside the School Street doors so that those who struggle to climb stairs could make it into the sanctuary and parish hall.

Now, if the Lord decides to show up in a wheelchair, she can get in.

Another renovation decision was to move the altar from the east wall, now graced by the organ, to a free standing table in the middle of the room.

This way not only would it be accessible for the Lord in the wheelchair, but it would proclaim the beautiful biblical witness that God comes to level ground, in the midst of the people, which is why at the 10:45 service we read the gospel not from the pulpit but from the center aisle.

I should preach there, too, if I weren't a better writer than I am a speaker; if you think I'm an incoherent windbag now, you really don't want the extended disaster that is me untethered from the pulpit.

Yet this elevated position smacks dangerously of title and authority and inequality, as if I'm somehow closer to God than you are, when our gospel reading says I am really farther away.

Luke begins it with an inventory of the men on the mountains, the roll call of the elevated, those lifted to positions of authority where they can look down on the people, and that is of course what they tend to do.

Luke lists their important names and positions, from Tiberius the emperor to Caiaphas the priest, all the political and religious bigwigs so that you are well aware of who and where they all are.

It forms a kind of landscape in your mind: you see the peaks, the positional mountaintops, the high rises and their top floor corner offices, the skyline of power and prestige, often imitated by churches, including at one time this one, with God up front at the top of the steps, where rulers belong, where the wheelchair and the common sinner cannot ascend.

Luke draws our eyes to the pinnacles, to the points and power brokers closest to the sky where everyone assumes God lives, makes us take note of them, and then startles us with center aisle gospel: *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*

This was before Dubai and Las Vegas; there are no skyscrapers or Caesar's Palaces in the desert.

The land is dusty and open, and the lyrics of the prophet Isaiah sing it flat too:

*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.*

God wants it to look like Illinois...

*The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.*

But not too much like Illinois...

*And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

For all flesh to see it, for there to be sight lines for humans and lizards alike, for wild animals and wheelchairs, the topography has to be wide open and level...no mountains or pulpits in the way, no valleys or potholes that limit the view of those at their bottom.

The landscape of salvation is radically equalist, which is why in Luke's gospel Mary sings of the lowly lifted up and the powerful thrown down, so they will end up at the same place, and why, when Jesus preaches what we read in Matthew as the sermon on the mount, it is not from a mountain at all but from a level place, like the center of our room.

Luke is drawing our eyes away from the peaks and valleys of oppressive hierarchy to a world with a completely new and rather Midwestern landscape, away from the urban skylines into a flat wilderness horizon, to a world remade for God where everyone has equal standing and a shared dignity.

The emperor and the governor want nothing to do with this, of course; Tiberius will hold a press conference and call it Socialism to scare people away from it while Pilate sends henchmen to the woodpile to order more crosses, to prepare the way of the Lord.

The crooked don't want to be made straight and the mountains never want to be made low, so this Advent project of divine highway preparation is never a smooth or simple one.

We shy away from it, usually by trying in our typical American way to individualize it.

How do we prepare a way for the Lord in our homes, in our own lives?

What are the mountains and valleys in our hearts and schedules that need knocking down and lifting up, the obstacles in our uneven priorities that need to be removed so that we can see salvation?

What are my sins that need forgiving?

For what bad deeds do I need to repent?

These are important questions, good places for us to start, but we cannot be content to stop there.

Our lives are only a small part of a much bigger whole, and our choices help shape the landscape of power in our world even if so subtly and gradually we do not notice it, like erosion from footsteps or a rock reshaped by a river.

The way we move through the world reshapes it, so: are we leveling the ground and preparing a way for the Lord?

Are we participating in lifting up those who are too low to see, and in lowering those who are too high to see, as a gift of blessing to both?

How are we helping and how are we hindering, and what in our behavior and participation needs to change, needs to repent, so that we are preparing God's way instead of in God's way?

Martin Luther King, Jr. has eloquently reminded us that we are all *caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, in a single garment of destiny.*

We are pretty tangled up; there is much both to unravel and to reconnect.

As John understood, and as the renovators of Resurrection understood, preparing the way of the Lord is a serious communal project, a big architectural undertaking that cannot be done quickly or alone.

This Advent, our little community has a chance to practice this work of preparing the Lord's way again.

Behind me stands our giving tree, which ironically is equally hard for almost everyone to reach.

It will be adorned this season with hangtags listing gift requests from those in valleys of need.

The pews are littered with green sheets that are gift request forms, so that those in our community can request specific blessings from others who might be able to provide them.

This project, if we are not careful, can fizzle into charity, which is not what John the Baptist is preaching.

There is no repentance, no leveling, no change in mere charity; it is the reach of someone on some mountain handing down an item to someone in some valley.

It doesn't lift the valley and it doesn't lower the mountain.

It might move the person but it doesn't much alter the landscape, and it can even reinforce status quo inequalities with feelings of hopeless dependence and personal satisfaction.

John calls us to something deeper and more daring, more seismic and substantial.

Look at that green gift request form in your pew.

I want to call your attention to one sentence toward the end of the explanation printed there:

*Gift requests need not be limited to tangible items; requests for special prayers, services (perhaps a ride to church or the store), or other intangible gifts are also welcome, and allow those of humble means to participate as givers.*

This is no small detail.

Those of us in the valley don't need to receive something as much as we need the chance to exercise our dignity by giving something we do have to offer.

Those of us on the mountain with powerful, generous hands who like to fancy ourselves self-reliant need the fuller's soap of receiving something we cannot provide for ourselves.

All of us will then have new sight lines, new and widened perspectives on reality, and a better view of the salvation of God...which will not arrive at the top of the steps or sit on the top of the mountain.

Advent is moving us toward a miracle that the sky itself will have to bend low to see.

Salvation will be born in a barn, as low as the center aisle, as level as the table in the middle of our room, laid in a feedbox as high as a wheelchair, as easy to look at as a baby, heaven down to earth, the Lord of all himself lifted up in a lowly mother's arms.

And all flesh will be able to see the salvation of God...but not if we're looking up.