



ST HELIERS CHURCH
& COMMUNITY CENTRE



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

10th December 2023, 2nd Sunday of Advent

Prepare the Way by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

40 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ... 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.
Isaiah 40:1-11

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight,' " 4 so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Mark 1:1-8

I've a confession to make. I do count myself as a South Islander. I've spent over half my life living in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island. It feels like home. And so, when I hear the well-known opening verses in Mark's Gospel about a wilderness and a desert – I think of the Central Otago desert. The extreme cold of winter. The withering heat of summer. You enter into these wide-open landscapes and are confronted by the wildness and the magnitude of it all. Timeless and unchanging .

Few capture it better than the iconic painter and photographer, Grahame Sydney. Take, for example, his painting entitled, "Crossroads", depicting the Ida Valley.

For me, part of what makes Sydney's work so memorable is the way he makes use of contrast. The tension between the background and the foreground. In the background, timeless and unchanging, lie the ancient hills and mountains quietly watching our coming and our going; and in the foreground, the detail of the fleeting present immediately before us. Where we spend most of lives, passing rapidly from one thing to the next.

This is indeed a crossroads in more ways than one. The highway of our fast-paced and distracted lives intersects with a hardly-used gravel road leading into the wilderness. Blink and you'll miss it. Most people do. Going at 100km/h it's hard to take everything in.

...which is why Sydney's painting is an invitation. An invitation to notice what we may not otherwise have noticed; to pause at this crossroads, this lesser-travelled path, this highway in the wilderness.

His painting is an invitation to take that straight road in the desert leading us out, up, beyond to contemplate our smallness, our transience, our insignificance in the shadow of the eternal mountains and the God who created them.

In this way, I see Grahame Sydney as a kind of John the Baptist figure. Just as Sydney is a voice in the Central Otago desert inviting his viewers to look and to ponder, so too John the Baptist comes to us from the Judean wilderness crying out to stop and notice the coming of the eternal God into our lives – for God, he contends, is coming as sure as the wind rolls down the hills of the Ida Valley, if we pause long enough to notice.

That's what the season of Advent is about: preparing our hearts for noticing God in our lives and in our world. There's something powerful about slowing down to notice at the time of the year that is often the most frantic and distracted.

And it strikes me that what is especially true for Advent is generally true about our whole lives. We spend so much of it in the foreground. The fleeting present. Occupied by where we've come from and where we've got to get to by 3:30pm this afternoon. There's always 101 things on the to-do list. Only made worse by emails, texts, notifications demanding our attention.

And there's nothing exactly wrong with this. We need to live in the foreground in order to function and organise our lives. Without my Outlook Calendar app, I'd be lost.

Only thing is, we can spend our whole lives living in this fleeting present so that we never notice the wonder, the mystery, the joy, the peace of God's life birthing among us, in us, around us.

That's why John the Baptist's ministry is so crucial. That's why the work of preparing our hearts is so crucial. John reminds us that God is coming into our world, sanctifying, saturating, baptising our lives with holy presence – but unless we learn to notice, we'll pass God by like a car speeding on an open highway. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight the path in the desert.

Today, we are baptising Arthur McKibbin. And I like to think that's what baptism is about. It's an act of preparing our hearts for the coming of God into our lives. Baptism is an affirmation that this world is holy and good. That we as a community are holy and good. That Arthur, this beautiful, unique child of God, is holy and good. We're learning to notice.

Today, Charlotte and Damon, you are choosing to intentionally pause at the crossroads and take Arthur down that lesser-travelled path. He does not yet know or understand the significance of this decision. And that's ok. After all we spend much of our lives, held and carried by those who love and support us. The hope is that, as he grows and is led down this path, he will begin to choose to travel that road by his own volition.

Until that day – even when that day comes – you are bound by your promises to support him and provide sacred space for him to pause and to notice – to encounter the unconditional and transformative love of God. It's a big promise. A life-changing and life-expanding promise.

But you do not do it alone. Take a look around you at this group of people committed to journeying the way in the wilderness together. We are people hastening into the desert to meet the God who is ever hastening towards us. So let us prepare the way for the Lord in our hearts. In our lives. In our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.