



## The Way to God: God's Way

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Sunday, December 7, 2008*

*Isaiah 40:1–11:*

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God. “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.” A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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.

To begin with an early memory: I heard a soft whimpering sound coming from the room down the hall where my little brother and sister slept. Entering, I saw my brother sound asleep. The source of the whimpering was a little ball in my sister’s bed, wiggling about under the covers down in one corner, at the foot of the bed. This was in the house in Newark which we left when I was in third grade so my sister, three years younger, would have been five at the oldest. I pulled up the covers from the foot of the bed and found Becky digging furiously at the sheets, trying to burrow her way through to freedom. She had gotten lost under the covers and was trying to dig her way out. I don’t remember whether she woke, or what happened next. But I remember how cute and funny she looked, now exposed, but still pawing at the sheets like a determined furry little animal.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyred Lutheran pastor, while imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote a letter before Christmas 1943, in which he said, “Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits and hopes and putters around but in the end what we do is of little consequence. The door is shut, and it can only be opened from the outside.” We are here, living our lives, doing the best we can, awaiting, anticipating the coming of God, the presence of God in our lives.

The prophet Isaiah announces a stunning word of hope to the people of Israel who were captive in Babylon at the time: “Comfort. Comfort ye, my people,” saith our God. This was the first word spoken by God to the people after a silence of 150 years, announcing that the time of captivity and exile was over, that the time of homecoming had begun. Gathering the people from exile and calling the people home to God is the defining narrative of Holy Scripture and of our faith. Writes Frederick Buechner, “No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a *vision* of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons us.”

I had assumed that the instruction to prepare a highway, to clear the path for the coming of God . . . I’d assumed that instruction was directed to us, to the people. On more careful examination, however, the passage from Isaiah appears to report the activities of a council of government, cabinet members to the Holy of holies. The opening proclamation comes from God alone: “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God. Then, “Speak tenderly.” Says one: “Cry out!” And another replies, “What shall I cry?” Still another voice cries, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The command to prepare is issued, then, not necessarily to the people of God or to us; it is to others of God’s court: “You, go to the mountains; you, to the sea, and you to the valleys.” A chorus of heavenly beings, deployed, sent out to prepare the way.

Why does this interpretation matter? Because it means the coming of God does not depend on your action of mine. Do your good deeds, say your prayers, love your neighbors, raze those mountains, level the rough places; dig all you want in your dark little nest, as cute and foolish as a tiny little girl lost in her own big bed. It is only a matter of time before you too will realize that, like being in prison, the door can only be opened from the other side. Ultimately, it is God who prepares and paves the way to us; by grace, God comes to us. I am just recently coming to understand this in new ways, for I see that I have been hard at work, trying to make my way, pray my way, into God's presence. I am not sure I have got this figured out yet; it is a work in progress, but I'd like to share a portion of my own journey.

It was one year ago that I returned from my sabbatical journey. Only now are some of the discoveries I made coming into focus and becoming clear. I set off, as you may know, on a quest. I was searching for at least a couple of things, each of which had to do with desire.

A few years ago I got it into my head that I wasn't doing very much for myself, that most of the time I was busy doing something for my children or family, for this congregation or my ministry. I was also aware that I'd never gotten very good at expressing my own needs. In any number of circumstances, when asked, "What would you like, Ledlie? What do you need?" I am often stumped. A therapist friend has said that, for me, desire is an undeveloped muscle; I don't know. But, I thought, I need to do something for me.

The other desire I had was for God, for a deeper relationship with God. Yearning, desiring, and hungering have been cornerstones of my faith; almost synonymous with faith. I have preached about my perception that some of us are filled with a sense of faith that is akin to knowing, almost possessing; such people feel sure in their faith and can claim, as did Martin Luther, "Here I stand; I can do no other." Others of us have come to recognize that the hunger we feel for God, even the absence of God and the consequent desire for God, is what fuels the passion of our faith. As Moses wandered the wilderness determined to reach the Promised Land, so we march on, grateful for whatever occasional signs of God's presence we may encounter along the way.

Thus, my sabbatical was an ideal opportunity to do something for me and be selfish in a healthy sort of way—and also a time apart for me to seek, perchance even to find, the presence of God. So, I set off on my quest; yearning I was, and yearning I went.

I did not lower the mountaintops or raise up the valleys, but I went to the mountaintops—to the Himalayas of India and Bhutan, and I traveled to the valleys—the river valleys of the Ganges. It was a wonderfully rich journey that filled me in many ways; I spent considerable time in prayer, writing, reflecting, often contrasting my own faith in Jesus Christ with the spiritual paths of Buddhism and Hinduism. The spiritual epiphany of my journey came toward the end, as we were visiting for five days in Shingkar, a remote mountain village in Bhutan; we ("we"—I was traveling with my daughter) were guests at the monastery of our host Lama Ngodup Dorje.

I wrote to you then, describing the hike Lama Ngodup and I took one day, up through the rough pastures where yaks grazed, pausing to catch our breath in the thin air as we neared 13,000 feet, passing through the clouds and mist, arriving eventually at a tiny temple clinging to the edge of a cliff. It was during that walk that it came to me that if I was so determinedly desiring something, it followed naturally that I must be missing something, needing something; there must be some lack or absence that I am striving to attain or fill.

What could it be? I took stock, an internal inventory. Is it love? No, I love Sarah, India, Nicholas, my parents and many others—and feel myself to be loved by them; I don't want a new partner or new family. Is it my vocation or professional circumstances? No. I love being a priest and love being at St. Peter's. Friendship? I could put more energy into nourishing friendships, but it's nothing to drive me to the other end of the globe. Is it God or faith, or something spiritual? I don't think so; I can run hot or cold, passionate or tepid in my faith, but all things considered I feel good in my faith, and have a passable spiritual life.

I came to see that somehow I had become focused on and attached to my own desiring, my own hunger. My hunger had taken on a life of its own and was roaming free, un-sated and insatiable. There was no thing that I could get that was going to fill the void; no acquisition was going to satisfy. A conversation with Lama Ngodup about attachment and possessions led me to reflect on the parable of the rich young man in Matthew's Gospel. I spent a good deal of time with it and found myself in it. The young man was good and well-intentioned; he was, after all, seeking a wise teacher and seeking the way to eternal life. However, his energy, his focus, like my own, was on "getting."

One day a young man came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to attain eternal life?" "What do the Scriptures say?" Jesus asked him. The man recited the commandments—to love God, to love neighbor, and so forth. "All these things have I done," said he. And Jesus' response: "You lack one thing. Give. Give what you have. Give all that you have. Give yourself away. Then, come, follow me."

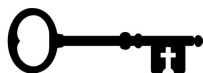
You see, I was trying to get something, find something, achieve something. And to my efforts, Jesus says "no; no, no, no; give; give something." As soon as you imagine you are lacking and you feel that you need something, then look about you, look for something to give, look for someone to give to." The way to satisfy my desire—or at least respond to my desire—was and is to give.

I realize too that my energy in prayer has been misplaced, misdirected—that I have been seeking to get to God, to reach God, to plow down some mountains or fill in some ruts.

Because it doesn't work, I've felt that I'm not praying well enough, hard enough, deeply enough. How foolish of me! How ridiculous! I may as well dig a tunnel at the bottom of my bed.

Do we think God is not here? God is coming; God is near; God is present. God IS here.

The Advent announcement is not that you better get cracking and pave the way; rather it is that the long wait is over; the gift is come, that the journey has already been made—for us. For you, as lovely and as loved as a little girl curled up in the corner, whimpering, God is pulling back the covers, scooping you up and bringing you home to safety. You have been in exile for lo these many years, so hear now my word to you: “comfort, comfort ye my people.” Amen.



Open hearts. Open minds.