

“Preparing the Way”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 40:3-5

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 3:1-6

Diane Loomans, in her book “Full Esteem Ahead: 100 Ways to Build Self-Esteem in Children and Adults,” says this:

“If I had my child to raise all over again, I’d finger-paint more, and point the finger less. I’d do less correcting, and more connecting. I’d take my eyes off my watch, and watch with my eyes. I would care to know less, and know to care more. I’d take more hikes and fly more kites. I’d stop playing serious, and instead seriously play. I’d run through more fields, and gaze at more stars. I’d do more hugging, and less tugging. I would be firm less often. And affirm much more. I’d build self-esteem first, and the house later. I’d teach less about the love of power, and more about the power of love.¹”

That is how Diane Loomans would make straight the paths and prepare the way. Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah paints a picture of life’s wildernesses, valleys and mountains that we can see in the words of Diane Loomans when she talks about finger-pointing, correcting, being a know-it-all, taking things too seriously, and being too firm.

Can you imagine replacing any of that in your life with creative, loving, patient, affirming, and playful ways of being? As Isaiah says, “Then the glory of the Lord would be revealed, and all people shall see it together....”

What a vision. What a goal – the glory of the Lord shining through in the way we interact with one another. What would that take?

Isaiah tells us what it would take to prepare such a way for the Lord to shine through. “Every valley...shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill...made low; the uneven ground shall becoming level, and the rough places a plain.”

What are the valleys and mountains and rough places in our lives? Anybody? Examples of things that get us down; huge barriers in life we can’t get over; rough patches we have to get through? I guess the valleys are the things that bring us down. When you feel down, have you ever noticed how hard it is to bring yourself out of it? I sure have.

¹ Diane Loomans, "If I Had My Child to Raise Over Again," Full Esteem Ahead: 100 Ways to Build Self-Esteem in Children and Adults (Tiburon, Calif.: H.J. Kramer, 1994), 194.

All the tips and tricks in the world sometimes just don't seem to help. But you know what does help. Someone else. If someone else notices that you feel down and makes an effort to make you feel better, often that helps, doesn't it? Helping someone else feel better is one way we can let the glory of the Lord shine through, as the valleys of life get lifted up.

What about the mountains? The mountains are those huge things in life that get in the way of our goals or expectations, things like large, unexpected expenses that just won't go away, or a major, life-changing illness, a decision in the past that you can't go back and unmake. Mountains are immovable. And yet, Isaiah speaks of a time when the mountains will be made low. How is that possible?

The only way to make life's mountains low is to raise up other parts of life. Let's say you may have a huge amount of debt, but that's nothing to worry about if we remember that God will take care of us. Or as Jesus says in Matthew "... Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. ... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them...." God will take care of us, always.

That's one of my favorite Bible verses, capable of laying all mountains low, not by getting rid of the mountain, but by raising up even higher the love and provision of the Lord, grander than any mountain.

What about the rough places in our lives. I think of these as our hard edges that rub others the wrong way. We all have them. The first thing to do about hard edges is realize what yours are. If you don't know what your hard edges are you're not paying attention – because, believe me, the people closest to you in life, they're giving you signs every day of just where to look.

Think about one of your hard edges in life – or ask someone what that might be. Once you see it for what it is, it's not all that difficult to smooth it out to make the rough places in your life a little less difficult, for both you and other people.

The best way to smooth out a rough edge is to pray about it. Keep it in mind, look for when it gets a little prickly, and then stop, and pray – pray for the Lord to show you a better way of responding or interacting. And he will! "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed," says Isaiah, "and all people shall see it together...." Together.

We're in this together – through the good and the bad, the ups and downs, the rough patches and the smooth sailing. It is only together that we can lift people up when they're in the valley of despair, make those insurmountable mountains in life seem small compared to the blessings we share with one another, and smooth out our rough edges so that we and others have an easier go at life, together, with God's help.

This is the second Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting. But not just passive waiting, as if things will get better if we just wait it out. No.

We are called to active, expectant waiting. We are called to wait on the Lord, and in doing so, to prepare the way for his arrival, in our lives, having Jesus show up in our lives.

The holidays are a great time to prepare the way for the Lord. Most other times we go though life content to feel down every once in awhile, but nobody wants to feel down during the holidays. When you see someone struggling or in need this holiday season, that's our opportunity to prepare the way for that person to encounter the Lord, together with you, with us.

There is no better time than now to look for ways to make others feel better, to put our biggest problems into perspective next to our many blessings, and to work on being more easy going, smoothing out our rough edges. There's no better time than now to let the Lord shine through, preparing the way for more Jesus in our lives and in our world.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

You call us to prepare, watchful God – prepare to entertain angels, to be alert, to wait and watch, to be awake for the coming of glory, to receive your presence in our lives.

Send your Spirit upon us, we pray, that we might be made ready to open our hearts and lives with gladness.

Fill us with the joy of anticipation and make our waiting a sweet time of communion with you.

We pray this in the name of Jesus, who led us by his Bethlehem star to kneel at his cradle, that this day we might raise our eyes to the cross and our voices to heaven praying prayer he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**