

Piedmont Presbyterian Church



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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

When was the last time you tried to cross a piece of Oregon wilderness without a road? Where did you last wander without at least a worn path or trail to follow? I remember taking a few ventures. What I remember is that when you're walking across sand dunes, you sink a foot or so with each step. That forests are full of brambles and misleading dead ends. That slopes are so steep and slippery that it's difficult to stay upright. The open meadow that looks like it should be easy to cross is actually full of tall, sharp grass, hidden ditches, berms, and mud. It's very different than a stroll down a sidewalk, or footpath or hallway. Think of the wilderness that was the next time you take a walk across the yard, or to the store, or go to work. What would it be like to be to cross that ground in its untouched state? Would it be uneven? Would there be obstacles? Could you make the trip in one day? I bring this up because our Bible lessons for this week talk about preparing a road as a way for God to come to His people, in the wilderness, no less.

Isaiah 40:3-4 says "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.'" This passage forms our frame for understanding for John the Baptist in Mark 1:1-8. Mark quotes the Isaiah passage, and goes on to describe John's ministry of preparation. John calls people to turn towards God, away from unrighteousness, and he proclaims God's forgiveness. And he says the one who is coming after him is even greater, and will bring a baptism of the Holy Spirit. John is a preparer; he's like the opening act, warming up the crowd, getting them ready to listen to Jesus. He's laying down the road, making it ready for Jesus. Psalm 85 says that when God comes, "Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps."

This coming Sunday is the second Sunday of Advent, in which we would light the candle of "Peace." The English version of the word comes from *pax*, the Latin word for peace, and in its bones is the concept that peace means pact or agreement. *Pax* was what happened when two warring sides came to an agreement to cease fighting. Eventually it began to mean the absence of war and conflict. This is of course only one facet of peace. In Japanese the word for peace is *heiwa*, formed by two characters, one meaning flat, plain or broad, and the other harmony or something harmonized. The root of the word

seems to suggest a state of balance, and tranquility. In Hebrew, the word for peace is *shalom*. *Shalom* is connected by scholars to the words for being complete and whole. It also is connected to God's justice and righteousness, wellbeing, and safety. An illustration of the shalom concept of peace which is used more than once in the Old Testament is "eating the fruit of your labor," e.g. you are able to sustain yourself and be rewarded by your work, your labor is not exploited or the fruit stolen. In these many facets of peace there is both an inner-self and outer-community dimension. Peace involves relationships: our relationship to God, to ourselves, to our brothers and sisters, to strangers and the community.

Part of preparing the way of the Lord is to be peacemakers in our world. We can prepare the way of the Lord by seeking to make peace in whatever actions are available to us; remembering the many dimensions of peace God calls us to. There is so much conflict, imbalance and brokenness around us, I think we get overwhelmed by what we have no control over. The terrain we are called to make peace in is every bit as wild and uneven as the Oregon wilderness. We forget that all God is asking us to do is the thing in front of us that God has equipped us to do.

Road-building takes time. Ask the Oregon Department of Transportation, which took years to straighten out a curve in a road going to the coast. They graded it, prepared it and laid it down, but the hill kept moving on them. They tried and then had to try over, and change their plans and try again, until section by section, the road was completed. God is patient; what seems like a long time to us is actually the time we have to prepare the way- instead of groaning that 'this is taking so long' we can be glad, 'look at all this time God is giving us to be ready.' We are not building the road by ourselves. We are preparing the way together with John the Baptist, in partnership with each other, as one with the Holy Spirit.

What can you do today to make a little peace in somebody's life? To help reestablish a bit of balance or wholeness? Even one can of donated food will help somebody feel a little less hungry. A smile to a stranger can give them a feeling of being welcomed. A supportive phone call or card can lift somebody up. A soothing word can help restore tranquility. A phone call or letter to your state legislator or city council can encourage them to protect the most vulnerable in our community- or joining an ongoing campaign to address the issues of racism, housing insecurity and hunger in our state- all these things are small additions to the road that prepares the way. This isn't a one-time act, but an ongoing challenge. Think of it as preparing a path made of righteousness: each act that increases peace in the here and now is a small part of the leveling, grading, and smoothing that needs to take place, part of the preparation for God to enter the world. Before Jesus returns to walk down this road, in all his power and might, let's do our part to make this road is ready. We're being given this time, to prepare. He won't come as an invading army, but as a shepherd. He will gently lead his flock, and carry the young in His arms, He will lead us on the broad and level road prepared in the wilderness.

The love, peace and hope of Jesus Christ be with you, Pastor Sarah