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**Advent Preparations**  
*Clean Up Needed, On ALL Aisles*

*Holy Lord, a voice has been heard in the wilderness preparing the way for your son to arrive in this world. Prepare our hearts to receive your son and help us to prepare for his coming. Amen.*

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/isaiah-of-the-exile-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-4>

Maybe you have had the experience also... you are in the store... maybe a market, and an announcement calls out over the store's paging system...

*Clean Up Needed on Aisle 11 ...*

Store management is letting their staff know that some preparations are needed for that aisle be ready for the customers who are coming.

We know something about cleaning up. We learn about it early. Robert Fulghum talks about the things we have learned by Kindergarten... and cleaning up our own messes is one of those things.

Sometimes we can make a kind of game of it. I know of a young someone, whose caregiver once said...

*"What a mess. What a sight. Let's put it back."*

To which the child replied.

*"Mess! Sight! Put back!"*

and promptly began putting the toys away. And when the child had finished putting it all away, promptly dumped it all out again, just for the joy of the game.

*"Mess. Sight. Put back."*

Some things in life are much more serious.

As a teen, I knew about my dad's tools, and how to use them, properly. I also knew that properly using them also meant putting them back, properly, when I was done.

*Clean up, needed... in the garage...*

If I had left them out, or if I had put them away improperly ... well, my Dad would not be pleased, and things likely would get unpleasant, if you know what I mean.

Cleaning up after ourselves makes room for other activities, for ourselves or for others. And if we have permission to use someone's tools and space, then courtesy means restoring things to proper order afterward... for whatever it is *they* may wish to do next.

Again, I remember as a young person, having family travel from across the country to come visit us. And I remember making special preparations in order to welcome them when they arrived.

Sometimes the cleanup we do is an act of hospitality. And such will be the case when we resume in-person meetings. We will want our space to be safe, inviting. We will have preparations to do.

The prophet Isaiah told of one who would prepare the people.

What I will share next is a kind of follow on to some of our Zoom discussion last week, about Bible translations.

When you read the prophet Isaiah, do you read him for what he said, that Christian preachers later used to explain Christ to their audience?

That is one approach, but it is certainly not how the first audience heard Isaiah.

And what about the book itself? Is it all by one author, or were more than one involved?

Our scholarly research affects how we approach these questions. And it can affect our translation work.

I believe, because of how I was taught, that we should seek to understand the meaning of the scriptures for its initial hearers, before we go to the next step.

And the audience who heard our reading today, surely seems to be a different audience than those who were the first to hear words like these, also from the book we call Isaiah, only in earlier chapters.

**Again from the CEB ...**

*<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. <sup>15</sup> He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good. <sup>16</sup> Before the boy learns to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.*

**In this passage the prophet is offering comfort to the people; that the armies coming to destroy them will not be successful; that God will fight on their behalf to destroy those armies.**

**This is a kind of redemption... saving them from destruction. The armies involved are those of the Assyrian empire. And the king of the Nation of Israel is Ahaz. Read the entirety of chapter 7.**

**The words of the prophet in chapter 40, are to a different setting. The nation has been destroyed, the people devastated, dispirited. Those to whom the prophet offers these words are in exile, and he is now promising a return, again accomplished by God.**

**This is a new redemption; being bought out of bondage, and returned to their homes.**

**Preparations will be made for that return. And when the return happens, it will be as if the people were transported home on a superhighway crossing many miles of desert. The people were in exile, not in Assyria in the north, but in Babylon, far to the east, and Assyria was no more.**

**Hearing these words in this way, I hear at least a couple of quick take-aways, and more when we dig deeper.**

**Those quick take-aways are first - that God is going to do something new, something amazing, something beyond our imagining, because that is who God is. And second - that sometimes groundwork is needed to prepare for the new thing that God will do.**

**It is not that the work of the people accomplishes the new thing of God. It is not OUR efforts that bring in the kingdom of God. But we are preparing for it; and its arrival will be experienced differently depending on those preparations. Sometimes we need to clean-up, as we are anticipating the arrival of our special guest.**

**So what about Mark, when he says these words about a desert highway were about John the Baptizer, calling people to repentance?**

**Mark is a good preacher. And like any good preacher he sees the significance of a passage not only for the original audience, but also for the audience to whom he is preaching.**

**One way of understanding Mark is that he is not saying that Isaiah was predicting John the Baptist, but rather than the words of Isaiah are fittingly applied to the work of John the Baptist, finding fulfillment in the time of Jesus, just as they also had found fulfillment about six centuries earlier in the nation's return from exile.**

**God is doing a new thing, AGAIN. And the people need to prepare AGAIN. Clean-up is needed. How should the people prepare? How can we straighten the way for God's new in-breaking into our experience?**

**Mark does not go into details about John's preaching. He just explains that it was about repentance, about both changing hearts and minds, AND changing behaviors. The baptism he offered was not Christian baptism, but a preparatory baptism, a washing that symbolized repentance ... symbolizing the preparation, the clean-up that was needed.**

**Mark uses this to introduce the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.**

**Jesus was the one in whom God was now acting in a new way, to redeem the nation of Israel. Jesus is the one through whom the Holy Spirit would be poured out, the one who would usher in the rule of God, on earth as in heaven.**

A good preacher not only hears the words of the scriptures for the message given to the original audience, but also for how it can be brought to bear for her or his audience today.

Cleanup needed on Aisle 11... Cleanup needed on Aisle 10. This aisle needs cleanup. That aisle needs cleanup. ALL the aisles need cleanup.

You know it is true. Stuff is seriously messed up. And we cannot just ask God to put the toys back in the toy-box. Sometimes we need to get busy with cleaning up our own messes.

We should not expect our heavenly father to be pleased if we have left his workshop in shambles. We need to be busy putting things back into proper order.

We have company coming... we pray for and anticipate and hope for the day when God's will will be done on earth as in heaven. And we will not make that day happen, our company will arrive when they arrive. But we have some serious getting ready to do to welcome that day.

The Letter we call Second Peter offers

*<sup>9</sup> The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.*

*<sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief.*

I remember, while I was growing up, I often would procrastinate, underestimating the time that would be needed to complete a task before my dad got home. When he got home, and I had not completed the task given, to say he was disappointed is probably an understatement.

Peter is urging us to be ready, to not procrastinate, to do the preparations that are required. We have work to do while we are waiting in hope.

*“The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”*

– Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament Scholar

The truth is, things are messed up, and we need to be actively cleaning up. The truth is, CoViD, has changed the future course of our society. Things will NOT go back to what they once were. The truth is, the ugliness that has surfaced and run rampant over the last number of years is a reflection of, a symptom of a deeper illness in our society, one that requires a change of heart and mind, and a change of direction.

We have things to grieve. We do.

And the truth is that God is still God, and God is still faithful, and God is still doing new things, and God calls us to prepare the way. We are a people of hope. And today, we lit a candle reminding us of our task to Prepare.

Do you remember John's song as written in the musical Godspell?

Pre-ee-ee-pare Ye the way of the Lord.

So... make a start. What will YOU do to smooth rough places... to elevate the depressed places... to bring down the lofty places a peg or two... to straighten in today's wilderness a highway for our God? Where is there a mess that you can at least begin to clean up? That is your calling. We have company coming.