

“The Bulldozers Are Coming!”
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Daniel Smith
At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
On Sunday, December 4th, 2005 – The Second Sunday of Advent

The Lessons: Isaiah 40: 1-11
Mark 1: 1-8

I have a strange question for you all...Have you ever felt the urge to operate really heavy machinery, a wrecking ball say, or a bulldozer? I'm serious. Have you? I have, ever since I was a kid. Its probably one of those guy things that I shouldn't be proud of but the fact is I can't shake the impulse. Sometimes when I pass through a construction site and see a big bulldozer, I feel a pang of envy towards its operator. Truth be told, I've even risked trespassing on construction sites after hours just so I could climb inside a bulldozer cabin and palm the controls. Call it the kid in me. Call it the power hungry macho man. Call it what you will but I bet at least a few of you can relate. You know who you are.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, and what brings these earth moving images to mind is our scripture from the prophet Isaiah which is also quoted in our reading from Mark. Hear these lines again.

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, every mountain and hill will be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Sounds like a job for the Komatsu D575, the world's largest bulldozer! But let's get back to the 6th century BC for a moment. At the time this passage was written, about 540 B.C., the Israelites are still suffering their exile from Jerusalem, wandering the wilderness in Babylon, wondering how to sing God's song in a strange land. They are waiting and hoping to one day make their journey home. According to the prophecy in this passage though, God has dispatched angels and prophets from the council of heaven to bring a message to the weary and despairing Israelites. God tells the council to speak tenderly with words of promise and peace. "Comfort, comfort, all my people!", so says God. At last, the Israelites have assurance, through Isaiah, that God IS still speaking. Our text points to a new horizon of hope, a new day in which God will be revealed for all people to see. And so, a voice cries out in the wilderness, "Make clear a path! Prepare the way!"

The promise of God's long awaited revelation surely brings glad tidings to the Israelites, but we have also to imagine a collective gulp as they realize that the work of preparation for God's arrival is no small thing. The hospitality that is asked of the people requires so much more than making room in hearts or in homes or in inns for that matter. The prophet suggests, albeit poetically, that in order to prepare the way for the God's coming, the very earth must be moved! Mountains must be flattened! Valleys must be filled! And a great highway must be laid out in the desert! These expressions are as familiar to our ears as they are vexing. We hear them every Advent. If anything, they may evoke for us idea that when God is revealed, the world as we know

it will somehow be shattered and that everything will be turned upside down and inside out. True enough. In fact, these images would have had a more practical connotation for its ancient hearers. As it turns out, all his talk of leveling the earth and making pathways straight are rooted in ancient engineering practices. To create safer and more efficient travel for ancient kings, royal engineers were actually commissioned to raise portions of valleys, to cut roads through mountains, and to make smooth whatever rocky paths. And, if you can believe this, the first recorded use of asphalt as a road building material occurred not long before the time that this portion of Isaiah was written, around 625 B.C. in, all of places, Babylon. Talk about roadside trivia? For the Israelites, this idea of a highway through the desert may have conjured dreams of a road back to Jerusalem, with God coming to marshal a joy filled homecoming parade. Imagine scores of displaced Afghani refugees crowding the nation's highways in a one way return back to their homes. But in the end, this highway through desert is not intended for the people so much as it is for God. The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, will be passing through and the appropriate response is: "Quick! Call the D.P.W!"

Can you see why I opened with the bulldozers? Our Advent preparations call us to so much more than those things that may put us in the mood for Christmas – singing carols, making wreaths, baking cookies, decorating trees. Advent calls us to radically change the entire landscape of our being and of our world. It calls us to move the earth as we make way for God. Rather than sitting stuck in holiday traffic on our way to the mall, I think a far better vantage for our preparation would be sitting in the driver's seat of a giant bulldozer! Humor me if you have to, but really...let's try to imagine what that would feel like. Consider it a guided meditation for your inner- construction worker. Ready?

The keys ARE in the ignition this time. You're at least ten feet off the ground. Your adrenaline begins to rush as the engine starts rumbling under your seat. You literally have the power to move mountains at your fingertips. Given the right amount of time and guidance, you could recast your every surrounding. You could set forth new horizons! Where would you begin?

Of all the things in this world that stand in the way of God's presence, where you would begin to make clear the path?...For starters, what are the places in your own life or your own heart that need raising up or tearing down or leveling out, to pave the way for God's coming? Are there valleys of insecurity in you that need lifting up so that you might discover the true gifts and strengths God has given you? Are there mountains of perfectionism that need tearing down so that you can find on the path of humility and vulnerability to which God is calling you? Would you fill in the canyons of despair that keep you from moving forward in hope, in joy and in service to God's creation? Are there boulders of anxiety that keep you from living in God's grace? What if you had the power to move such mountains in your heart, or even in our world, the power, say, to reshape our current landscape, geographic, political, socio-economic you name it – we're just imagining here. Where would you start?

Would you raze the headquarters of some greedy and corrupt corporation? How 'bout a nice roll down Newbury Street at this time of year, or through Toys R Us? If you could, would you start in Washington, D.C.? Hmmm! Or maybe it's the security gates of a free trade zone sweatshop in El Salvador? Would you pave the way for racial equality? Would you tear down some prison walls and proclaim early release to the captives?

If the prospect of having such power is getting your juices flowing at all, I dare say, you're already paving the way, the way for the one who is more powerful than you to come after you. If on the other hand, you think this exercise is getting a little crazy for a Sunday morning, that's okay too. After all, it's not until I start eating locusts with a dab of wild honey that you really have to worry. Can't you just see a modern day John the Baptist, shouting on the streets like a crazy person, "The bulldozers are coming! They're ready to roll! The Bulldozers are coming!"

The Trappist monk and author, Thomas Merton, offers some helpful insights that may help us to further understand why the importance of clearing, or even bulldozing, the way for God. He writes:

"We live in the time of no room.... The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced ...by the technological furries for size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration."

Merton continues, "The primordial blessing, 'increase and multiply', has suddenly become a hemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions and massed together, marshaled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race, and with ourselves, nauseated with life. ... There is no room for nature. The cities crowded it off the face of the earth. ... There is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention, for the awareness of our state. ...there is no room for man."¹

To make clear a path in our lives for nature, for quiet, for solitude, for thought, for attention...I wonder just what kind of earthmover that would take? But our Advent preparation must push even further. Ultimately, we must clear a way for Christ. Madeleine L'Engle once wrote of Advent: "This is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with reason, there'd have been no room for the child." For us too, some of the hardest rocks to clear out and smooth over to make room for God's incarnation just might be those of our overly rational minds that make us doubt the very possibility of God's presence being made flesh and being made to dwell among us, in Jesus, in the poor, in the very least of these.

Indeed, at this time of year and for us as Christians, all roads to lead to Bethlehem, to the manger, to the place which Annie Dillard has described as "the X that marks the spot"! If God is to be found there, with the poor and the least, what kind of mental and spiritual bulldozing will you need to do get there? And, what kind of social and political bulldozing do we all need to do to ease God's way here?

When the there meets the here on the path we prepare, that is when we will know the great comfort of which the angels and prophets spoke! And a voice says "Cry out! Lift up your voice with strength, lift if up with a bulldozer if you have to, do not fear, and say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" Here is your God! Friends, in this wilderness world, in this time of no room, the time has come to prepare the way! Amen.

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Time of the End is the Time of No Room* in *A Thomas Merton Reader* ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell, New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1989. p. 363.

