

“Messy”
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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Road construction. We need it, and we want it, when the roads get too bumpy, or the traffic’s too crowded and an extra lane might thin things out and speed things up. But what a nuisance! It gets worse before it gets better: delays, detours, and a rougher ride for a while. It’s worth it, though, once we have that new smooth pavement to drive and a broader road to eliminate the choke points that have slowed us down and tested our patience. But we tend to take it for granted, and when the next project starts up, we lose focus on the benefits to come, and resent that awful mess we’ll have to endure for what seems like forever.

When John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, he made it clear that his primary purpose was road construction. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” He was quoting from the prophet Isaiah, “In the wilderness prepare a way for 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.”

That’s a big, long-term project. It’s no small thing to flatten mountains and fill in valleys with the rubble. The sheer scale and the massive mess involved induce a sense of awe and wonder and dread. John’s mission was to embody and fulfill that prophecy from Isaiah, to be a world-class mess maker who cleared the way for Jesus’ arrival. Most people probably thought him mad, and people who liked the landscape of their lives just fine probably got mad with John.

But despite the resistance, he succeeded, making a way for people to prepare for Jesus. He offered them a powerful experience of baptism that led those who received it to turn their lives around, to be immersed into a new world, a new way of thinking and being that cleansed

and transformed them. It gave them open hearts ready to accept Jesus, and all of that is wonderful, but very much like John, Jesus didn't come to make things tidy, but messy, full of radical change and redirected lives and risk.

In this season of Advent, life gets pretty messy. We have parties to host and to attend, gifts to buy, travel plans to make, and houses to prepare for guests. And then there's the traffic. But even without all that, it can be an emotionally messy time for everybody, especially those of us grieving loss, facing Christmas without someone we love, and feeling out of place in our sadness while everybody else seems so cheerful. A part of us anticipates Christmas not so much for its coming as for it passing, the relief we feel when it's all over, and life can go back to the way it was before.

However, the purpose of Advent is not to return to how life was before, but to be fully present with building roads and making sacred messes, anticipating a future when the way of Jesus is broader and straighter and smoother. Now we might think that's not our job. John paved the road for Jesus to enter the world. The work's already done, and to a certain extent that's true. But just as Jesus came into our lives as a human being to be with us and for us, Jesus will come again, an event we make ready for every day, but especially in Advent.

You see, Jesus' first arrival connects with the second, with the promise of his glorious return, and in between those two blessed moments, Jesus is the Way. He is the path all are invited to follow, and as we and other followers walk that Way and encourage others to go on the pilgrimage of faith with us, we become more like Jesus, and as we become more like Jesus, who is the Way, we begin to become the Way, so that we can serve as the avenue through which Christ enters the world.

That's a big, long-term project. None of us can do it alone. And it will be messy. Like John, some will think us mad, and some will get mad with us, but Advent is our annual chance to focus intensely on who we are and who we are meant to be and what we are meant to do. Road building, the only way to peace and joy, transports us to places we never imagined or hoped, and it is this act of discipleship, of road building, that we focus on in Advent, for the sake of Christ and for the world. Amen.