

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

REMEMBERING ADVENT

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

In starting to think about our Gospel passage for today, I was reminded of a story I read in the news a couple of weeks ago. The story was about the visit that Ivanka Trump was about to make to the Indian city of Hyderabad, where she was representing the United States at an international gathering having to do with economic empowerment for women. What caught my attention in the story was the fact that in preparation for her visit, along with all the other dignitaries who were going to be there, the city officials of Hyderabad were gathering up all the beggars and homeless folks in town - and there were apparently many thousands of them - and temporarily relocating them to a makeshift village outside of town, so that they wouldn't be an eyesore or interfere in any way with the sensibilities of the important foreign visitors.

So that started my thinking about what's involved behind the scenes when really important dignitaries visit places where they don't normally spend time. And just for the fun of it, I dug around on the internet and found a short article from a Springfield, Illinois, newspaper about the preparations the local utility

company was making for a visit from the President of the United States. This is the press release from the utility company.

When the president comes to town, there are a lot of local organizations that get involved with making the visit a success. From city officials and the police department to medical professionals and airport staff, it takes a village to get the city ready. Did you know that we play a part in a presidential visit, too?

Before the president arrives in Springfield, our electric crews check all the power lines and services that might impact the president's visit to make sure that all potential problems are resolved in advance. They'll check for things like trees on or near the lines or limbs that might need to be trimmed back. While we can check for those problems, we still need to be ready for things we can't control like vehicle accidents, critters getting into things they shouldn't and Mother Nature when the president is in town.

The president's first stop is the airport. We have a troubleshooter stationed at the airport if something happens to the power. A troubleshooter's main job when there's an outage is to be the first person on the scene to isolate the problem and either fix it if he can or call in to dispatch to let them know what other crews are needed to get power restored.

Once the president arrives at the event venue, we have a crew in the area on stand-by just in case something happens. In addition, other field crews who may be working on other projects are also on stand-by to

help. We also have troubleshooters onsite from the time he arrives until the time he leaves.

In addition to ensuring that the power stayed on for the president's visit, we also provided buses to other Springfield organizations.

These support buses helped those organizations in their role to making the visit a success. Like we said, it takes a village and we're happy to be part of the Springfield village that made this event successful!

And that's just the utility company! As the press release itself points out, the local police, medical profession, airport staff, and many others also have to do their part in getting ready for just one person visiting, and probably staying for only an hour or two.

And of course this is really just a normal human tendency, only magnified a thousand-fold. I'm reliably informed that people often tidy up around the house when they're expecting company, and of course, if you were expecting the President of the US to drop by, you'd probably make extra sure the dishes were washed and there were fresh towels in the bathroom.

In the Ancient Near East around the time Isaiah was writing, this was carried to extremes. When a King was planning on visiting some part of the Kingdom where he hadn't been before, someone would be sent out in advance to make sure the trip could be made in complete comfort. That could even include building new roads, which might include getting rid of hills and filling in valleys.

That's the exact imagery Isaiah is borrowing from to compose his poem to the Lord in today's reading.

A voice cries: 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, And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed... (Is 40:3-5)

Writing at a time when the nation of Israel was returning after long exile, Isaiah was describing poetically a spiritual cleansing and preparation that would herald the coming back of the Lord to resume his central place in the rebuilt and rededicated temple in Jerusalem.

The early Christian writers like Mark in our Gospel passage for today drew upon that much earlier poem found in what we call Chapter 40 of Isaiah, and they treated it as a prophesy of the beginning of the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, with John the Baptist providing the voice crying in the wilderness for a spiritual cleansing and preparation.

But of course, Jesus did not arrive - neither in His ministry nor in His birth - as a King riding in all a king's pomp and glory to visit a far corner of his dominion. There was no great caravan of ministers and royal servants armed guards. The roads remained the rough country lanes suitable only for walking or at best riding a donkey. The hills were not leveled and the valleys were not raised.

And even if we look underneath the poetic imagery to what the poem describes, a spiritual revival and renewal, we don't find any such thing preceding Christ's advent, either into His ministry or into His birth. The people who flocked to see John the Baptist, first, and then later Christ Himself, did not come because they had been spiritually prepared. On the contrary

they *came* to be healed and enlightened: that was their goal, not their starting place. As Jesus Himself put it, He came to seek the unrighteous, not the righteous.

And at His birth, the welcome was so unanticipated that Joseph and Mary were forced to take refuge in a stable area, and soon to flee for their lives and that of their newborn child.

No, the world into which Jesus brought his message was not welcoming, not spiritually prepared: it was a world which rejected Him up to the very end, and nailed Him to a cross.

So I think what we have to do when we read Isaiah as a prophet is to reflect even deeper, and realize that the Kingship of Christ depends upon a different sort of preparation, a preparation that is of the individual, not of the society, a preparation that is of the individual heart, and mind, and spirit.

And if we do that, what we will discover, I think, is that the spiritual advent is not a one-time event, but rather a renewal, and a renewal that has its basis in memory, in remembering.

Today is our special memorial star, our service of celebrating and bringing our friends and family to memory.

In the same way, every year we read through the story of the beginning of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And in telling each other that story, in remembering it, we bring it back to life. Just as memory provides a resurrection for our friends and family, so remembering the beginning of it all - the visit of the herald angel to the virgin Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in the manger, the serenade of angels, and so on - remembering all of

that levels out the hills and valleys that have emerged during the harsh realities of the preceding year. Going back to the beginning sets us once again on the smooth and straight road from the detours and byways into which we inevitably wander. Resurrecting the advent of Christ as we do during this season heralds the birth, not of a new age, but of a new beginning for each one of us. Like the wise men from the east, we approach the little town of Bethlehem, only not to bring gifts, but to receive them, to receive the gifts of patience and courage and renewed hope for the coming year.

Each Advent candle we light guides us farther on the route, brings us closer and closer to the true source of all light and of all grace, so that we might worship there, and sing songs of praise, and find peace and merriment in the true meaning of Christmas celebration.

And so, gracious God, we pray this beautiful Advent morning for Your sure and guiding hand as we travel the road that leads back to the beginning. We pray for brisk spirits and hearty fellowship. We ask that you keep us mindful that this is your appointed season for celebration and renewal, and for a joyous awareness of our glorious and eternal relationship with Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, born in a manger, and it is in His name we pray for these things.