

“Highway-Building and Peace-Making” based on Isaiah 40:1-5 and Mathew 3:1-12
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT — December 4, 2011

Every year it's the same. Advent arrives. We prepare for Christmas. We start on our gift lists, begin decorating. Even here we've set out the Advent wreath and candles and soon we'll have our tree and beautiful garlands in the sanctuary. For some of us, our decorating is nearly complete. Yet no matter how far into the season we are, our holiday joy's nipped in the bud coming face-to-face with a man in camel's hair proclaiming: "Repent!"

John reminds us, while we await Jesus' birth, that God's arrival has implications for how we live. He echoed Isaiah: “Make straight in the desert a highway. Valleys lifted up, mountains made low; the uneven ground leveled, the rough places smoothed.” See, the Babylonians built special roads for annual processions of the idols they worshipped. Isaiah countered that the one true God will lead the exiled Israelites on a highway from Babylon back to the promised land.

Far from re-decorating, Isaiah and John called for reconstruction; an infrastructure upgrade, not just to get us faster from point A to point B, but to help establish shalom, the comprehensive peace meaning also wholeness, harmony, the “rightness” of things. This deeper peace explains why Isaiah's image works. Peace is a path discovered when the way's unclear; a means of escape from hard circumstances; a way of returning home to a place of comfort; with blessings at the end of the journey; and — as God's highway — love, justice, and nurture along the way.

Sounds great, right? Here's the catch: We've got to build this highway. John tells us how: Repent! Repentance signifies a change of heart, but literally means to turn around. John's command is more like, “Get yourself a new orientation for the way you live, then act on it.”

For John, there's urgency. God's realm is at hand or very near, so repentance now is important. Same goes for Jesus. In the next chapter of Matthew, Jesus concludes his first sermon by echoing John: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Our response to this in-breaking of God's realm is key; by our continually turning toward God, this realm will be at hand. We do that in an active way, says John, by "bearing fruit worthy of repentance." We return to God by how we act, living out right relationship with God, self, and neighbor.

Remember a few years ago, when the United Church of Christ tried to air a TV ad and was denied by the major networks? The commercial — depicting two bouncers at church door, selecting who could and couldn't enter — was edgy. It suggested some churches don't welcome all people, and declared, "Jesus didn't turn people away" and, as the UCC, "neither do we." The networks said they rejected the ad because it touched on the exclusion of gay couples and the Executive Branch had recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman. But the ad neither endorsed homosexuality nor spoke about gay marriage. It addressed exclusion. The ad was geared to people who — for whatever reason — feel alienated from the church.

Alan Wurtzel, NBC's head of broadcast standards said the ad "throws down the gauntlet at a variety of other churches" that allegedly do not accept gays or minorities. Yet we know, whether they intend to be exclusionary or not, many feel that some churches do exclude them because of race, poverty, or sexual orientation, among other things. The UCC ad offered an

alternative — the extravagant welcome lived and advocated by the One for whom, during Advent, we say we are waiting.

Or we can choose to deny that the child born in the manger grew up to minister to women (shocking in his day!), lepers (the ritually impure), tax collectors (traitors to Israel), gentiles (outsiders), prostitutes (outcasts), and sinners of all kinds; the one who tells us the blessed are those who care for the "least"; the one who taught us that all the commandments can be summed up in loving God and our neighbors as ourselves, and then showed us that everyone — even the stranger — is our neighbor; the one who told us God is like a loving parent who runs to embrace and celebrate the child who has run away but returns home. The ad didn't throw down a gauntlet; it held up a mirror. And that's why it was rejected — it made too many people uncomfortable about what they saw in the mirror.

To be honest, I felt uncomfortable, too. The observance this past week of World AIDS Day brought this back to me. You see, I once had an older cousin named Baxter, who was gay. He was a smart, creative, loving young man who was, however, too different for his time and place to find acceptance. Steeped in shame, he tried to stave off depression with drugs and, in the end, paid the price by contracting AIDS via dirty needles. He died in 1986 at age 28. Now, I could fault the Dallas, Texas social scene and religious climate he lived in. Or I could blame his family that was embarrassed by him and who cast him out. But the truth is, all of us who knew Baxter and didn't extend to him the fullest, most welcoming embrace of human fellowship failed him.

This is why our church identity as a place of extravagant welcome matters. I don't know if Baxter would have come here. But I do know that others like him — those who yearn to be affirmed and embraced as the people God made them to be — deserve the radical hospitality we say we're seeking to extend to all people. Moreover, this is how I believe we begin to prepare God's highway of peace. It's a small step, but it exemplifies Gabriel Fackre's concept of "Aiglatson." Aiglatson — a word formed by spelling "nostalgia" backward — symbolizes how Christians are nostalgic about the future; how we yearn for God's future realm of peace to come; and how the desire for such shalom prompts us to begin to live the future we believe God is calling us into — of love, justice, and welcome.

"Peace isn't the absence of struggle," said Frederick Buechner, "but the presence of love." And so, our re-decorating isn't enough as we prepare for God drawing near to us and establishing a realm of peace. We need the reconstruction involved in building God's highway of peace. And we need the renovation of our lives as well, as we return to God and neighbor in love, and work to usher in God's realm of peace by walking in the ways of peace here and now. May the Spirit of the Living God who comes to us and abides with us make it so.