

Straight Paths? Please

“Comfort,” the prophet Isaiah proclaims.

“Make straight a path for God,” he continues.

It’s a compelling vision. It’s logical. It’s simple. It’s “straight” forward.

A few years’ ago, I watched the Queen’s Gambit on Netflix which is a fictional story about Beth Harmon, an orphan who discovers she’s a chess prodigy. As she’s becoming famous, in an interview, she explains why she loves chess. She says, “It’s an entire world of just 64 squares. I feel safe in it. I can control it. I can dominate it. And it’s predictable. So if I get hurt, I only have myself to blame.”

If only life was like a game of chess.

My guess is most, if not all of us here, can think back to a time in our own lives when everything seemed to be going as we had planned and then all of a sudden life did what life does. It threw us a curve ball.

A new diagnosis.

A sudden and unexpected career change.

Complicated family dynamics.

A global pandemic.

You name it. Life has this way of disrupting what we thought we had figured out. We all want certainty, and life refuses to oblige. We all want to believe we have more control over our lives than we actually have. We want to believe that if we just do the right things, just believe the right things, just work hard enough then everything will work out the way it is supposed to.

And yet, my guess is that deep down we all know that none of us have as much control as we’d like.

And that’s a scary thing. But it is not a unique thing. For the entirety of human existence, life has had this way of taking our desire for control, our desire for certainty, our naïve hope that we can somehow make things work out for our good and shoving them back in our face. I wonder if it was the feeling of being out of control that made Isaiah long for a straight path for God. Isaiah was trying to find words of hope after the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem, slaughtered thousands, burned the temple, and carried the people away to exile. So he prophesies:

Isaiah 40: 1-5 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Somehow Isaiah finds the strength within to proclaim, “Comfort.” But then Isaiah’s vision moves away from chaos to one of control. “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” And who can blame him, right? When the world around us is falling apart, we all want a straight path. We all want life to work by a predictable pattern. But if our hope depends on everything always working out like we expect, that’s a fragile hope that cannot sustain the people the next time the Babylonians or the Persians or the Greeks or the Romans invade the land. It’s a hope that cannot sustain us in a world filled with global crisis after global crisis. It’s not a hope that can sustain us when our own personal world feels like it’s falling apart. But maybe the hope of our faith, the hope of Advent doesn’t need a straight path.

My friend and Episcopal priest David Henson writes this:

“Have you ever heard anything more absurd than the idea of anyone making a path straight for God to amble down? Since when does God see the wilderness and look for a highway on-ramp? In my experience, God likes to take the long way home. So long that home simply becomes wherever God is. I imagine God taking one look at the straight paths we’ve scarred into the wild earth and either laughing or weeping or both, wondering if what we wanted was a tamer God or just one on speed dial who is always waiting to pick up. But isn’t God perpetually going out into the wilderness, with the wandering Israelites or searching out a lost sheep, out beyond the cell towers, voicemails, and text messages? I like to think that when God sees our straightened paths, God mischievously pulls loose the knot on our neckties or tosses our purses in the mountain lake, and putting out a cigarette in the hardened path, God walks in the opposite direction our straightened paths lead, just to see if we want a God who follows us or if we want to follow God.”

When I read David’s words earlier this week, I felt comfort. But it wasn’t the comfort of a straight path, the comfort of certainty. Rather, it was the comfort that comes with acceptance. I am not in control. And neither are you. We can’t fix a lot of what is broken...at least not in the easy, straightforward way we would like to. We live in a world where straight paths are often hard to find and where seemingly straight paths turn out to be too good to be true.

And all of that is...ok.

Really, it’s ok.

John the Baptizer, the one whom the writer of Mark’s gospel saw as fulfilling Isaiah’s vision of preparing the way and making a straight path for God actually took the long way home himself, and so did the people coming to him to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The path out into the wilderness was anything but straight. You see, there was already a straight path by which people could receive forgiveness. For centuries, the Jewish people had a system in place by which they could repent and be forgiven for sin. They would go to the temple and offer a sacrifice. And that was still happening when John starting preaching in the desert. But it had been co-opted. The high priests were more interested in making money by selling the animals for the sacrifice than they were of being conduits of God’s forgiveness.

Offering the means of forgiveness only to those who could pay was a major problem because if you couldn't afford to buy an animal to sacrifice, you were told you couldn't be forgiven. The temple and its leadership then was able to offer forgiveness to those who could afford to pay for it, to the rich, to the socially respectable people. But it had nothing to offer the poor, nothing to offer the outcasts, nothing to offer those who felt crushed by Rome except condemnation and exclusion. For the people coming to John to find healing, to find forgiveness, they couldn't take the straight path. They had to wander through the wilderness.

And maybe, that's where the hope is. When our institutions and systems fail us, God comes to us outside of those systems. When we feel like we're lost and can't find the path, God meets us in the middle of the wilderness. When the path that seemed so straight and so clear turns out to be filled with twists and turns and dead ends, God journeys alongside as we begin the scary work of starting to walk again in a new direction.

Listen again to the words of the hymn the choir sang:

In deepest night Christ coming shall be,
When all the world is despairing,
As morning light so quiet and free,
So warm and gentle and caring.
One without voice breaks forth in song,
A lame one leaps in wonder,
The weak are raised above the strong,
And weapons are broken asunder.

As much as we want control and certainty, that's not where our hope lies. Rather our hope lies in the One who is present in the deepest and darkest night when all the world is despairing. Our hope is in the One who is present when all seems to make sense and in the One who is still present when all seems to be falling apart. Our hope is in the One who walks beside us when our faith is strong and in the same One who walks beside us when we doubt God's very existence.

The hope of Advent, the hope of our Gospel has never depended on all being well. Rather, the hope of Advent, the hope of our Gospel has always depended on God being with us.