“Straight Paths” - Stephanie Sorge, 1/12/25

Last week, we talked about roads that aren’t straight, and this week, we have an exhortation to make them so. Sounds like Biblical clarity to me! We read part of this passage a few weeks ago in the context of Advent. John quotes Isaiah, basically saying, “It’s me! I’m the one preparing the way. It’s me!” His is the voice crying out in the wilderness.

The words and imagery would have been familiar to the crowds. The message from Isaiah - the promise of God’s salvation and restoration - had been passed down through the generations. Did any of them expect to see it fulfilled in their lifetime? So many others had lived and died waiting for the same. It was finally time for the prophecy to be fulfilled, but not in the way they expected.

Leveling hills and valleys and making crooked paths straight was how people prepared for visits from political or military leaders of the highest rank. This particular roadwork made an easy and smooth path for a parade through the town or city. Certainly, the long-awaited messiah would deserve the same kind of royal treatment, right? But Jesus often traveled hilly, rocky terrain. His path was never straight. In his final triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he rode a donkey. The path was made marginally smoother by coats and palm branches laid out before him. Jesus didn’t need a straight, level, smooth road to reach us, which makes me think that maybe we’re the ones who need it.

There are many ways to read and interpret the Bible. While I don’t condone cherry-picking from Scripture, the heart of the gospel might be captured in a beloved verse or two. John 3:16 *and* 17: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” God loves us, God wants to be in relationship with us, and God wants the very best for us and for all of creation. God’s movements towards creation and humanity consistently reach out to us. Nothing we do could limit God’s reach. We’re the ones who need level, straight, and smooth paths, and if that’s true, the work of preparation is for our own benefit.

If God isn’t putting up the obstacles that keep us separated from God, those obstacles must be coming from our direction. A pretty good definition of sin is that it is anything that separates us from God and from each other. It’s not that God holds those things against us. God’s mercy and forgiveness are more than enough to smooth the paths between us. Instead, we tend to get in our own way. Shame is a powerful force. It can make us want to cover up what we’ve done, or what we’ve failed to do. Covering things up doesn’t remove them, though. Shame can also lock us in the mindset that we are defined by the worst things we have done. Shame thrives on the lie that redemption is impossible.

Healing and reconciliation require honesty, which is at the heart of confession. Confession is being honest about those obstacles, and asking God to change our hearts, lives, and the world in which we live. That was John’s baptism - baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism gives us the courage to be honest about what needs to change, and the strength to live differently. Making hills and valleys level, and rocky paths smooth, and crooked paths straight begins in the honest space of confession, which opens us to new life and transformation that we’re offered through Jesus Christ.

Of course Jesus didn’t need to be baptized, but in baptism he chose unity with us. Just as he was affirmed as chosen and beloved at his baptism, so we are, too. We are chosen and beloved. We are connected to God through Jesus Christ, and connected to each other through the same waters of baptism.

Jesus’s ministry flowed out of the baptismal waters, and these waters continue to call us to participate in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Jesus was God incarnate, reaching out to humanity in love. He was the long-expected but unexpected savior, lifted not to any throne, but to a cross. He was the prophet, reminding God’s people of what God desires and requires: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with God. He showed us a different way of living, not just for our own edification, but as part of the ongoing transformation and redemption of all of creation. He invited others to join in the work, and he continues to invite us to do the same.

We can be transformed by the love of God in Jesus Christ. Making hills and valleys level, and rocky paths smooth, and crooked paths straight is really about knocking down the obstacles that keep us from living into this new life we’re offered in Jesus Christ. Confession is being honest about those obstacles, and asking God to change our hearts, lives, and the world in which we live. Baptism gives us the courage to be honest about what needs to change, and the strength to live differently. We are baptized into the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and called in baptism to follow Jesus and join in that work.

On this day that we remember the Baptism of Jesus, it is especially appropriate for us to recall and reaffirm our own baptismal vows, and to renew our commitments to live as Jesus calls us to live. It’s a great day for ordination and installation for the same reasons. These individuals have been called to serve as Ruling Elders through their baptismal calling. We celebrate that call and surround them with our support and prayers. We also affirm that the work of the church belongs to all of us! May we remember our baptisms and reaffirm our commitment to follow the one who unites with us in these waters. Amen.