

# ***Leveling the Landscape of Our Lives***

Isaiah 40:1-11

If anyone were to drive the entire length of I-95 from Maine to Florida, they may find that the most memorable part of the journey runs through Connecticut. The reason is not because it is the most scenic stretch along this interstate highway (as it is not), or the most congested with cars and trucks (though, at times, it may seem that way). Nor would they remember it because of the toll(s) it took on them (or *from* them), which would be the dubious distinction of New York City, at least in terms of money and stress.

What sets the Connecticut Turnpike apart from all the rest is the notoriety of being one of the ten most dangerous highways in America. The Norwalk area alone has one of the highest rates of accidents per mile of anywhere in the country, and not to leave us out, the road between New London and Old Saybrook is one of the most convoluted stretches of narrow lanes over hill and dale of anywhere along the entire interstate system.

Most of us would agree, it's not fun driving south from Waterford, especially in the rain or snow. The road from East Lyme to Old Lyme is downright scary at times. It almost seems as if the sadistically-minded architect of the Merritt Parkway filled in for a day or two while civil engineers were planning this particular stretch along I-95. Everywhere else it is straight road for the most part; here, it's like a four-lane, paved-over cow path! Truck drivers absolutely hate it; as do those of us in cars, buses, and campers. The state police record nearly as many crashes occurring here as anywhere else along the turnpike, even though the traffic congestion is much less!

I recognize the Connecticut DOT is continually trying to make improvements, but it's hard to imagine how they could do it, given the limitations for widening and straightening the roadbed. It's like trying to add another lane to a rollercoaster. It's one of those, *I wish they could start over and simply cut through the hills and bridge the valleys and eliminate the curves that make driving this bedeviled highway such a headache!* But barring a major earthquake that demolishes everything or another 1938-like hurricane that rearranges the Connecticut shoreline, it just won't happen. The hills and valleys are permanent fixtures in this stretch of road. To make the necessary corrections to straighten it out would cost more than the Big Dig in Boston and take longer than it took the Romans to build the Appian Way!

Still, it would be nice to hear our elected leaders come to us and say:

*Comfort, O comfort my fellow Nutmeggers;*

*You have served your term—your penalty is paid.*

*You will receive double for all of our sins!*

*Yes, in your wilderness of southeastern Connecticut,*

*We shall make straight through the various Lymes an  
absolutely divine highway!*

*Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain shall be  
made low;*

*The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a  
plain;*

*And the glory of the government shall be revealed,*

*And all people shall see it together,  
For the mouth of Malloy has spoken!*

That would be nice, wouldn't it? If this could happen, the only thing left we'd have to complain about are taxes!

Silly man that I am, I do think the collective sense of relief would be very welcome if a situation which seems impossible to remedy could be fixed without vexing complication and delay. This goes beyond straightening roads and fixing bridges. Longstanding frustration over entrenched incompetence, poor planning, and injustice are found in many places and are hard to endure through, even if you've never known anything better. People live with irresolvable situations all the time, true; but it doesn't mean they accept or surrender willingly to them. Down deep within them, people are restless, they want change. They yearn for improvement; they're tired of the way things are; they seek action by the powers that be to literally alter the landscape of life, with the hope they live long enough to see it realized. When things get intolerable for enough people, then they rise up and take action.

I don't know about you, but I make the same connection with what we've witnessed throughout the country over the past week, i.e., the need for seismic change in the wake of yet another grand jury failure to indict a white police officer for killing an unarmed black male. All the anger and frustration provoked by the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO last summer were reinforced and magnified by the grand jury on Staten Island which chose not to indict the officer who was responsible for Eric Garner's death in spite of video evidence; add to that all the other similar reports, including the police

shooting of a twelve-year-old African American boy in Cleveland (also caught on surveillance video). It's hard to view video footage of police tactics employed in many urban areas and not be outraged. It's made us acutely aware that race, class, and social location are significant factors and deadly barriers in our society that undermine any notion we may have of equal justice under the law.

Now granted, you and I normally don't have the fears that people of color have of police presence. It's not hard to understand why. Very few of us feel physically threatened by an encounter with an officer—typically, the worst experience we'd ever have is being pulled over for speeding or missing a stop sign. Nor do we feel frightened for our children or grandchildren if they were approached by a member of the local police. More often than not, we urge them to seek out an officer, because our experience, in general, is favorable of them providing protection and good service.

Yet, that's not the case for those who live in predominately African-American and Latino neighborhoods, or high-crime areas. There is fear for a reason—of criminals and of police. With the increasing militarization of law enforcement, many neighborhoods are similar to war zones, often with the same results. For much of America, we're waking up to the reality of the gap of trust between those in certain communities and the police assigned to patrol and protect those areas from potential crime.

Regardless of anyone's opinion as to who is at fault in each situation, we can't ignore the fact that something has to change. Incidents like these are not tolerable in a free and safe society, let alone one that attempts to be virtuous and just. This is not how

people want to live, nor is it really how law enforcement wants to patrol. It's reactionary fear and there are many elements that cause it. All parties have surrendered to a reality of violence and vengeance; intimidation and resistance are tactics used by many in order not to give into the fright that lies within. In the process, each has become the enemy of the other. It happens to both victims and enforcers alike. They are both oppressed by the stress and fear of the other.

Perhaps, if things happen for a reason, we have to hope this has become a wake-up call for many of us in this country. People from all walks of life are demonstrating in the streets because they recognize it can't go on any longer—the violent reality of our communities and law enforcement have to change or else there will continue to be one form of justice for some and another for the rest. It needs to change for the sake of justice, for the sake of fairness, for the sake of safety, and for the sake of each other's well-being—citizen and officer alike. It is a matter of leveling the landscape of our lives.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
And every mountain and hill be made low;  
And the uneven ground shall become level,  
And the rough places, a plain.

The poignancy and timing of our lectionary text from Isaiah has helped me put many things into perspective over the last few days. These poetic verses of Isaiah 40 are commonly known to us because we read them every Advent season; plus, they were quoted in all four Gospels introducing John's prophetic ministry prior to Jesus; we also remember them sung in the stirring tenor solo in the opening part of Handel's *Messiah*. They bring a sense of warmth, beauty and relief

when we hear them read, yet we may lack a context for what they actually mean.

When these words were first voiced, they were powerful and dramatic. It was a clarion call from the prophet for a seismic change for the people of Israel, who had scattered to the four winds or been exiled from their land under the military and political control of Babylon. They had suffered the same fate as many small nations, swallowed up by the great empires of their day.

While in Babylon, in many ways they relived their inglorious beginning a thousand years earlier as second class subjects under the autocratic reign of Pharaoh. Though some prospered very well, as a rule the Israelites were among the underclass long ago in Egypt, and once again, as Jews in Babylon—survivors who had figured out a way to make due, while possessing little or no control over their destiny or place in the world. Justice was rarely a privilege extended to a minority; independence certainly was not. In exile, they were condemned to their diminished place in the world, often scorned and scapegoated (as their history often repeated) with few prospects for change. It was if their history as a people would end there in Babylon.

But their story did not end there; something occurred before their whole identity was assimilated into the dominant culture—before they lost a sense of themselves in the injustices they suffered. After decades of surviving, the tables turned and the Babylonians were overcome by their own enemy, the rising power of Cyrus and the Persian armies. As a result, in a few months' time, the scattered people of Israel had an opportunity to reclaim their heritage and return to their homeland, as if in a second exodus. Out of this context

came the hope of returning to their forsaken land along the Jordan River and this inspiring proclamation:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her  
That she has served her term,  
That her penalty is paid,  
That she has received from the Lord's hand  
Double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

It was a moral claim of recovery, of divine justice and recompense unpredictably altering the events of human history, even when all hope seemed lost.

With Cyrus' edict, everything changed so rapidly that it was as if the entire landscape of their lives had been recast and remolded overnight. The formidable mountain of Babylon was leveled. The deep valleys of despair hanging over their people for two generations were bridged. Much like the demise of the Berlin Wall a couple of decades ago, the events of history unfolded so rapidly, the Jews ended their exile far more quickly than their forebears had entered it. Ezra and Nehemiah led the return to rebuild Jerusalem and for the Jews to restore their place in the world.

After this past week's events and everything that led up to them, I view this ancient imagery as a profound Advent hope for our times, particularly for people of color and others in the U.S. and around the globe who feel like they're second class. For those who feel as if their hope is starved, their faith diminishing and their spirit languishing over unjust circumstances beyond their control, the sense of powerlessness to alter the course of events is more overwhelming to

them than the sense of being oppressed. When you feel enslaved in any way, it will often seem easier to live with the fears and hardship than to try to fight it. Victims of violence often violate others whom they can victimize.

Systemic oppression occurs when victims feel as if no one notices or cares, that there is no way out, that nothing will change, that everything is set in stone, that the majority cares more about their own safety and privilege than the realities and hardships of others. This, I believe, is when the remarkable mercy and power of God breaks through and becomes most evident and impactful. Our God is one who seeks out and saves minorities! The last become first on our minds when God's Spirit stirs up collective outrage; when there is outrage over systemic injustice, then Advent hope returns.

Why? Because God cares; God embraces and loves each life that rises from this earth. When the voiceless are unheard, then sometimes in miraculous ways, it is God who cries out, *No more!*—whether in the U.S. or in Mexico, or in the Middle East or Europe, or Asia or Africa! When the evidence is ignored, when no one wants to face the truth, it takes the power of God to open our eyes (even in video form!) to see what's going on. When no one realizes or cares about what's happening, God will inspire people to rise up and seek change. As the African proverb goes, when we pray, God will tell us to move our feet. When the world is fast asleep to oppression in any form, then God will shake the earth and make mountains move and the valleys to ascend from their depths. God is leveling the landscape of our lives!

God's new Advent promise is found in the collective vision and activity of those who recognize human violence and injustice aren't tolerable anymore—for victim or perpetrator alike. The Voice that calls us out into the wilderness tells us that the One who would not allow slavery to be a permanent condition, or let the Caesar's cross be the final word, will generate hope in these times for those who yearn for just and beneficial change. For God will level the landscape of our lives, will help us overcome obstacles and bridge differences, and will transform the world with a vision of mercy and love, just as it has happened many times before throughout history. We just have to move our feet and make positive steps forward!

I firmly believe this. So much that someday, the Advent Scripture lesson for another generation in the future will be the story of our times and how the people around the world who walked in darkness saw that great light which led them to change their world for the better. That's what I believe. That's what I hope for. May it be so, Lord; may it be so.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
7 December 2014