

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT, C
Malachi 3:1-4
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Rev. Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon
December 5, 2021

Before I became the mother of two boys, I did not fully appreciate the beauty of earth-moving equipment. To me, a truck was pretty much a truck. But it wasn't long before I learned the difference between a bulldozer and a backhoe, and we would often go out of our way to watch these vehicles in action.

I remember spending the better part of an afternoon watching a building being demolished downtown. Our son Nathan was around 4, and we parked ourselves across the street from where they were taking down an old hotel that covered half a block. We were fascinated by the noise of engines revving, the smell of dust rising, the sheer power of those machines ripping apart brick and wood and moving piles of debris from here to there. It was a little bit scary watching those excavators on their rubber tracks maneuvering up and down steep mountains of rubble, looking like they could tip over any minute. But was also exciting, imagining what would come next on this building site. We learned the land belonged to a downtown church, and this demolition was part of a master plan to replace aging housing and create new space. I'm sure it took some real courage for that congregation to tear down the old and raise up something new.

Our scriptures today are about God tearing down the old and raising up something new.

Before Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist came preaching and baptizing to get people ready to receive the Savior. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John pictured God's work in Jesus as something like a giant bulldozer leveling out the landscape to create a beautiful road, a path wide and clear and accessible so that anyone and everyone could travel in God's company.

Prepare the way of the Lord! [John invited]

*Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
And the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth,
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

God was rearranging the landscape of history to make a way for all people to walk with God, and for all people to travel with each other in peace and equity and justice. God was opening a pathway of salvation -- meaning opening the way to healing, for individuals and for human communities in towns and cities and nations. God's pathway of salvation was even opening a way for the earth itself to be healed, as God's people came home to their role as earth-tenders, caring stewards of God's beloved earth.

As we catch the spirit of John the Baptist, we can just about imagine God like a bulldozer, relentlessly plowing through every obstacle to create this new reality. God literally moving

heaven and earth to bring people into relationship with the Creator. God even came to earth personally in Jesus, lived our life and died our death, to finally overturn death completely and raise us all up. All this to prepare the way for us to journey with God throughout this life and even beyond.

In these weeks of Advent, you and I are called to prepare the way for Jesus, this heaven-and-earth-mover, this life-changer, to come to us. Advent is the time to open up to God, open a pathway into our hearts. It's a time to reflect and pray, and also to repent – which means surrendering ourselves to God's greater workings and God's greater good, this new kin-dom God is creating in and through us.

It's not the way everyone understands this time of year, of course. This season leading up to Christmas brings out many good things in people – generosity, love of family, a yearning for peace. But it also tends to showcase the worst of our culture's greed and materialism. There's pressure to buy perfect gifts and create a perfect holiday, so much to do all of a sudden. The "holiday season" has a way of bulldozing us with expectations and values that are so at odds with faith that it can be truly disorienting, especially at this stage of the pandemic when we so long to get back to normal, but we also have that urge to reshape our old traditions in a more meaningful way. False jolliness will not cut it this year. Pretense has been stripped away by what we've all been through together. This year our Advent season can never just be more of the same old thing... it must be something new.

We can find great comfort in broadening our view. To consider not just how gift-giving and dinners and worship services will play out this year, but how this year everything we do will fit into the larger picture of how God is shaping this world.

Because if God is the ultimate earth-mover – then you and I are the earth God is moving around. We are not the earth-movers, we're the earth that's being moved.

We are part of God's massive building project, aiming to shape all creation to reflect God's image, and guide all people to reflect the love and strength and compassion of Jesus. The good news is, God is always lovingly pursuing this building project – in you, in me, in everyone. God keeps on moving the earth around in our lives. God keeps working on us, working in us, to arrange and rearrange things to be more Christ-like. God keeps on leading us deeper into ways of peace and generosity and courage, sacrifice and justice and forgiveness and joy.

But oh, the process can be uncomfortable at times, can't it?

Those were much simpler days, years ago, when little Nathan and I watched the bulldozers. Now he's done with college and over six feet tall. And Portland is a different place too. Back then the South Waterfront was still full of vacant lots, not skyscrapers and a tram. The Pearl District was still full of warehouses, not condos and restaurants and shops. Today the problems facing our city are thornier than they were before, our sidewalks full of houseless neighbors. We are all somewhat the worse for wear.

And talk about rearranging the landscape! The pandemic has done that in ways not one person could have imagined two Advents ago. There are days we scarcely recognize the landscape of our daily lives... masks and distancing and zoom worship and vaccines and boosters (thanks be to God!) There are days we scarcely recognize the landscape of our country... political divisions and disinformation, lies keeping people from protecting themselves against the virus, hatred resurging in organized ways -- even as so many of us are strenuously pursuing peace, seeking insights and taking action to pursue a deeper kind of justice for all.

And yet, for everything that is confusing, disorienting, and discouraging, we hold fast to our conviction that God is continually healing and continually upholding the human family. God continually prepares God's way in us, so God's life and love can be more fully expressed.

And in this season of Advent, this season of hope and expectation, we focus on what Jesus the Christ means to us and to all this earth in turmoil.

John the Baptist wasn't preaching to people who were on top of the world. They suffered under oppression by Roman soldiers, the vast majority were poor enough they worried how to feed their families, they knew discouragement and depression and often desperation.

Yet they were willing to hope. They were willing to rearrange their lives to make room for the salvation of God, coming through Jesus Christ. And so are we.

At any given moment, there are some things God is tearing down in us to make way for something new. Fears and insecurities. Attitudes and actions and influences God would have us leave behind.

And -- at any given moment, there are things God is building up in us. Faithful perspectives. Loving intentions. Courage equal to the harshest challenges. A strength of spirit to keep on keeping on, in confidence that we are eternally loved by God, forgiven and cherished and precious forever. We are never alone.

We ask God to help us set holy priorities for these weeks of Advent. We ask God to cleanse our lives from fear and despair, and deepen our Christian hope.

We ask God to help us watch for beauty. Practice gratitude. Be compassionate. Be generous. Seek out every opportunity to take part in God's magnificent healing enterprise, moving heaven and earth so that all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

God is preparing God's way in us this Advent. Thanks be to God. Amen.