Malachi 3:1-4

Canticle 4 or 16

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3:1-6

Prepare the way. Make the path straight. Level off the mountains. Fill in the valleys. Make the rough ways smooth. These words of Isaiah and Luke echo in our ears today. What if we really took these words to heart as faith-filled followers of Jesus? What would it mean to prepare the way of the Lord and make his pathways straight today? What would it mean to fill in valleys and level off mountains? What would it mean to enable all flesh to see the salvation of our God?

From our shared experiences, we know that our plans, our strategies, our ideas to fulfill these commands, do not always work out the way that we would have hoped. Does this mean that our plans are wrong, that our actions are mis-directed, that our methods are foolish? I don’t think so.

I believe that what our mistakes, missteps, miscues show us is that we are not in control. We are not perfect. We are not the masters of the universe, contrary to that well-known rock song. But as we heard in today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “….(God) who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ – that day when Jesus returns in power and great glory. Not necessarily today or tomorrow, but God will bring it to completion when Jesus returns. So as we work to fulfill the prophets’ invitation to prepare the way of the Lord, let’s not forget who is in the lead. Let’s not forget that even though we are indeed God’s holy people, to whom are given the gifts of God; even though we have been created to worship God without fear, and are holy and righteous in God’s sight; we are not God. Only God is God.

But then I ask myself, if God is in charge, why do things seemingly go astray? Why do our best laid plans sometimes fail? Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Didn’t Jesus live here on earth with us - eating, drinking, celebrating? Didn’t he die once, for all, so that all the world would be delivered from sin and evil? Truly Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. But somehow, all of Jesus’ efforts don’t seem to have created heaven on earth yet. There are wars and rumors of war. There are earthquakes and wild fires. We grumble and complain and gossip. Where is the righteousness that Malachi prophesied, rather than the wickedness and greed and injustice that we encounter day in and day out?

Well, there I go again, expecting instant results, immediate gratification, total satisfaction. While the prophets call us to prepare the way, to straighten out this world of ours, to take on certain responsibilities so that all flesh shall see salvation; they don’t tell us when that vision of salvation will happen, when it will come to fruition, when we will experience heaven on earth. In fact Jesus himself told us that the end times are known only by our Father in heaven. Ours is not to know the time, but to carry on with the mission….straightening, leveling, smoothing out the way for ourselves and for others.

We do stumble and fall sometimes, but we are granted grace to repair the damage created by our roughness. We are provided divine assistance to fill in the pot holes created by our greed. We are blessed with opportunities to remove those boulders that block us from loving others as much God loves us. That is what this season of Advent is all about: doing our part, in whatever time is allotted, to prepare us and the world for Jesus’ return.

In lighting the second candle on the Advent wreath today, we are reminded that Christ is the light of the world, pure brightness of the ever-living God, a light that is growing ever more visible in our midst. But we are also living in a season in which darkness is very tangible. As I sit in my office at home, I notice how much earlier in the afternoon I have to turn on the lights. In October I could watch the 5 o’clock news, have dinner and still be able to enjoy the fading lights of dusk. Now it is dark before I know it. This darkness also affects me physiologically. as I have a mild case of Seasonal Affective Disorder. The reduced hours of daylight produce a lack of energy, contribute to a blurring of focus, and can bring on mild depression. Luckily, since moving to southern California, I have experienced a significant reduction in symptoms. You see, the quantity of light, even in this season of dwindling daylight, is usually enough to keep me energized. All I need to do to ward off the symptoms is to get enough exposure to sunlight each day. More light makes me healthier. Doesn’t more light bring us all into a better place?

This is one of the reasons that I find Advent to be such a blessing. As we light one more candle each week, I am reminded that soon the days will be getting longer – darkness will begin to vanish earlier. As we light one more candle each week, I am reminded that not only do we need physical light, but that we also need the light of Christ that light that shines into the darkest corners of our lives. Even though the amount of natural daylight continues to decrease each day until the solstice, the Advent wreath is our beacon of light, our signal of hope – hope that tomorrow will be brighter, hope that the coming celebrations will be filled with joy and peace, hope that we will be prepared for that promised second coming.

Until then, we have our work cut out for us. We are called to participate in God’s great mission of reconciliation; filling in the valleys created by hunger and disease, breaking down the barriers that keep us separated from one another, creating highways paved with love and joy and compassion.

We are called to remember that “In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” That will be the day when Jesus comes again. That will be the day when all God’s people will be set free. That will be the day when “all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.” O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.