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**3-Narrative 14 – Advent 2
Isaiah 40.1-11 (Mark 1.1-4)**

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“Prepare the Way!”

Once upon a time there was a king who decided he wanted to move his palace to another part of his kingdom, making another city the capital of the realm.

He talked the possibilities over with his advisers & they had narrowed it down to 5 choices –

5 cities that had great potential but which were in dire need of something that would revive their economy. Each city was hopeful that it would be the one to be chosen.

In the middle of the summer the king and his entourage set out to visit the first city, but they soon discovered that the mountain that they would need to cross was way too steep and high for the horses to climb in the hot weather.

The king sent word to the city saying that before he could come they would need to level the mountain. After much discussion they sent word back: it would take too much time and effort and money to level the mountain – and besides, they really liked the mountain just the way it was.

By the time word got back to the king about the first city, it was autumn, and the king and his entourage set out for city #2 but they soon discovered that there was no path through the dense forest.

The king sent word to the city saying that before he could come they would need to cut a path through the woods. After much discussion they sent word back: it would take too much time & effort & money to cut a path thru the woods – and besides they really liked the woods just the way they were.

By the time word got back to the king about the second city, it was winter, & the king and his entourage set out for city #3 but they soon discovered that they would have to descend a steep valley and with the ice and snow, the path was just too treacherous.

The king sent word to the city saying that before he could come they would need to fill in the valley. After much discussion they sent word back: it would take too much time and effort and money to fill in the valley – and besides they really liked the valley just the way it was.

By the time word got back to the king about the third city it was spring, and the king and his entourage set out for city #4, but they soon discovered that the road was so crooked & twisted they could not get their caravan through. The king sent word to the city saying that before he could come they would need to straighten out the road. After much discussion they sent word back: it would take too much time and effort and money to straighten the road – and besides they really liked the road just the way it was.

By the time word got back to the king about the fourth city it was summer, and the king had visited four of the five cities. By this point he was feeling pretty hopeless about finding a new home for his palace. But he had yet one more city to visit. So he and his entourage packed up and set out. And soon they discovered that the road they were on was new.

It was wide and clear and straight, and as they went along, it became obvious that hills had been removed and valleys had been filled in, and the way was not only wide and clear and straight but almost perfectly level. Even though there were other cities just as close he reached this one in record time.

And as he entered the city gates he passed through crowds of workers who looked dirty and exhausted but also excited and overjoyed. They had wanted the king to make his home with them and so they had worked nonstop to make it happen. They had so loved their king that they had changed the environs of their city and dedicated all of their time and talent and treasure, working all year, razing their mountain, filling in their valley, cutting through their forest and making a straight road to invite and welcome and honor their king.

And now here he was and tired though they were they rejoiced because their king had come to live among them.

Just like the king in this fable, God wanted the best for God's chosen people Israel.
God promised to protect them if they relied on divine power and not human political alliances,
but they trusted in their own power, not God's,
and so their city was leveled, their homes destroyed, their possessions plundered,
and they were carried off into exile, to live in poverty as refugees in a foreign land.
They were a broken people, full of despair.
And into that situation God spoke a word of hope: God would come and save them and bring them home.
All they needed to do was,
“ ... ‘Clear a path ... for the Lord! Make a straight road ... for God!
Let every valley be filled in, every mountain ... be laid low...’”

According to Isaiah, God wanted to save his people,
but because of the way God had set up the universe in the first place,
giving humans the freedom to choose either of 2 paths,
one that would lead to death and one that would lead to life,
God could not rescue them without their help.
Just as in the fable, the people would have to prepare a way for God.
In the case of the exiles it took over 100 years for God's promise to be fulfilled.

There are so many things in our lives that are not the way we would like.
We lift those things up to God and pray that God will come and save us,
that God would make things right, that God would make things better.
And they don't get better and we wonder why.

There are, of course, things that are not going to get better.
We are not going to live forever, so at some point a prayer for healing is not going to be answered.

That being said, however,
I believe that God wants nothing more than to fulfill the desires that God has placed within our hearts.
Jesus came to show us the way to abundant life.
And the Holy Spirit is available to us with gifts of the spirit which include things like love and peace and joy.

So often however it seems like we are stuck in a Groundhog Day,
where we keep struggling with the same issues over and over.
It seems like God isn't listening,
or that God isn't powerful enough or doesn't love us enough to give us what we want.

I believe that most of the things we desire, God is able and willing to give us.
I believe that God already has the answers to our questions.
I believe that God already knows the shortest, fastest way to our dreams.

But here's the thing: while God has already done God's part we have not done ours.
We have not done what God says we must do in order for God to save us.
Like the cities in the fable, we have not made a way for God to reach us.

There are mountains and valleys and forests and crooked roads
that prevent God from coming to us with the answers to our prayers.

To me, the mountains represent the things in our lives that we consider the most solid and stable,
the things we rely on, the things we put our trust in.
So let's say someone is unhappy in their job and feels like they are definitely on the wrong career path
and they pray that God will help them find their dream job.
So God answers their prayer by sending them a series of job offers.
But because the job offers don't seem to pay enough, the person keeps turning them down, one after the other,
because they don't think they can afford a pay cut.
There is a mountain of reliance on their current job's compensation that keeps the new job from appearing.
So only when that mountain is razed and trust is put in God instead of in the current paycheck,
can the prayer be answered.
So sometimes for our prayers to be answered, we have to look at the mountains in our lives,
the things in which we put our trust, and be willing to lower them,
to let go of our trust in them, and transfer our trust to God.

We have to lower the mountains in our lives and we also have to fill in the valleys.
To me the valleys are those places of doubt and despair and negativity
in which we have given up hope that things can ever get better.
So let's say somebody is unhappy in a relationship and they pray that God would heal it and make it better.
Now God is indeed able and willing to heal it,
but the person is so focused on everything that has been & is wrong with the other person & the relationship
that they completely miss every opportunity that God offers to take the relationship in a new direction.
There is a valley of negativity that prevents any new positive growth from occurring.
So only when that valley is filled in with faith and hope and positivity can that prayer be answered.
So sometimes for our prayers to be answered we actually have to believe that they can and will be answered.

So there are mountains to be lowered and valleys to be filled and there are also forests to be cut through.
To me the forest that has grown up around us that prevents so many prayers from being answered
is the busyness of our lives.
So let's say there's someone who feels like there's got to be more to life
than going to work, and keeping the spouse happy, and raising the kids,
and they pray that God would help them feel like they were actually headed somewhere
instead of being caught on the treadmill of daily life.
God already has the answer they're looking for but the problem is they don't have time
to worship or read their bible or talk with their pastor or a counselor or pray or even be still & silent enough
to hear what God is saying.
There's a forest of busyness that keeps us where we are and prevents us from moving forward.
So only when that forest that busyness is cleared out can we move forward towards our dreams and goals.

So there are mountains to be lowered, valleys to be filled, forests to be thinned, & roads to be made straight.
To me the crooked roads are all the choices we make
that take us in a different direction from where we really want to go.
So let's say that someone has high blood pressure and prays that God would cure them.
God answers the prayer through their doctor who gives them a list of things they should do –
quit smoking, exercise, and change their diet.
But they're convinced they can never give up smoking, that they don't have time to exercise,
and they really don't think food is worth eating without salt.
They want to head towards health and so they do give up caffeine and they cut down on the alcohol,
but every time they have a cigarette or eat potato chips
they are taking twists and turns instead of taking the straight road.

Let's face it: every single one of us has
mountains to be lowered or valleys to be filled in or forests to be cleared or paths to be made straight.

God didn't put the mountains there; we did, whenever we've placed our trust in things other than God.
God and put the valleys there either; we did, whenever we've looked at the glass half empty instead of half full,
whenever we've focused on the negative instead of the positive,
whenever we've given into doubt or despair.

God didn't cause the forests of our lives to become so dense;
we've done that when we've allowed our schedules to take control of our lives.

God doesn't cause us to keep doing the things that take us in the wrong direction;
we do that every time we make a choice that is not for a higher good.

Lower the mountains! Fill in the valleys! Clear a way through the forests! Make your way straight!

God doesn't ask us to do those things in order to make our lives more difficult for us, but to make them easier.

Advent is the season in which we prepare the way for God to come to us and save us.
Our king is coming to save us, to make his home with us, and to bring new life to us!

I don't know about you, but I can't wait.

Yes, it's going to take a lot of time and effort and money

to tear down the mountains and fill in the valleys and clear out the forests and straighten out the roads,
but making a way for the king is the most important thing we'll ever do.

As we prepare for Christ's coming, I pray that the Spirit would empower each and every one of you to:

Lower the mountains - trust in God's power!

Fill in the valleys - trust in God's love!

Clear the forests - simplify your life!

Make straight the way - focus on the goal!

And most of all trust: the king is coming soon! Amen