

Today, the second Sunday of Advent 2009, will be remembered by millions of faithful people who have prayed for weeks as the Advent of something truly wonderful. I have been counting down the days, and now even the hours, because about four hours from now, I will be walking my own straight pathway. “For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.” Today is the opening of Highway 40.

I am completely serious when I say that I offered a prayer of thanks on day that I heard 40 would be open on December 6th, because I had arrived at the point when I felt like I couldn’t take it anymore: the morning commute, the crazy traffic, the 30 minute drive just to get to the grocery store. I know that I have preached about my commute before in more meaningful ways, but this afternoon I will be walking on Highway 40, celebrating this blessing with the rest of Saint Louis.

While it probably depends on your daily commute whether or not you think of the literal highway, these words from Baruch are definitely reminiscent of The Journey – capital T, capital J, which we so often discuss in our moments of pastoral care or perhaps in narrating our spiritual histories. The ubiquitous ‘Footprints’ poem, which has appeared in the powder-room of just about every funeral home I’ve ever been to, is an ultra-literal depiction of the specifically Christian journey: we walk through our lives, alongside of and occasionally carried by Jesus.

Baruch, however, in writing about an easy journey through the rough places, was speaking of a specific journey over in a particularly rough period of history. Nearly 600 years before Christ, in a period which has come to be known as the Babylonian Captivity, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in it. Thousands of Jews were kidnapped, ripped away from their home in Jerusalem and taken to Babylon. In ancient Jewish theology, the temple in Jerusalem was the literal home of God – God was thought to reside in the temple, calling all faithful Jews to visit at certain times of the year for feasts and holy days.

When the temple was destroyed, and the Jews taken away from it to Babylon, the Jewish people were ripped away from God. Baruch writes of the hope of his people that, one day, they might complete their physical and spiritual journey back to God – to Jerusalem, to a restored temple, to their home. The mountains that lay between Baruch's people and their home were great – the tyranny of the Babylonians, who destroyed their way of life; their despair at the destruction of the temple; the thousands of miles of desert and rock which lay between the Jewish people's home and their place of exile.

This poetry, written in exile speaks the belief, despite tremendous suffering, that the journey to God will be made easy, the mountains leveled, and the low places raised up. Baruch's people will journey back to seek their God.

This journey towards God is our own, and just walking from where I stand now, out the doors of the church, you can witness the physical signposts of that journey. The baptismal font, where so many of us begin; the communion rail, where we return week after week to be nourished; the columbarium, where some of us now rest.

And then there are the Sunday school rooms upstairs, the adult ed sessions downstairs, the bible studies in the library, choir rehearsals, vestry meetings, weddings and confirmations and funerals, coffee hours, hours spent in prayer and in service, hours spent setting up and taking down and locking up at night. The journey towards God is long and often exhausting, and we get really caught up in it.

I want to tell you a brief story from my first ever backpacking trip, and how I got caught up in that journey. I hope it will shed some light on Advent, and what we are doing here in church in general when we manage to not be busy.

The first time I ever went backpacking, was almost the last time I ever went backpacking. On Easter weekend of 2007, in my first year of seminary, I loaded up a pack with the supervision of my expert friends, Josh and Hannah, and headed out for a three-day trip, Good Friday to Easter. Josh and Hannah had briefed me on the rules of the trail: pack only what you need (real backpackers don't bring fancy things like iPods or hairbrushes); drink plenty of water; keep hiking north. We planned to cover almost fifty miles in three days, each of us carrying twenty-five pounds on our back.

It got so cold each night that I melted my shoes on the fire; I could barely chew my food through my chattering teeth; and I slept with two hats on. I became obsessed with mileage, noting each landmark and calculating how many miles until the end of the trip. My blisters grew larger with each minute, and with every peanut-butter based meal, all I could think about was hot Mexican food and some dry socks. In my myopia, I began to count half-miles, focusing only on the ground right in front of me. I stopped having fun, and ceased to notice the beauty around me.

On the final day, after twelve mind-numbing hours of hiking, I thought the hypothermia had finally set in when I saw ahead of me on the trail a glorious vision which caused me to laugh out loud through my chattering teeth. I reminded myself that it actually was Easter morning, as I watched a six-foot tall pink bunny rabbit hopping down the trail towards us, carrying a basket of goodies. The rabbit hugged each one of us, and passed out candy bars and beer, and walked the final three miles of the trail with us.

The giant Easter bunny (who turned out to be our friend, Brendan) ripped the trail-blindness off of my eyes. The miles and miles of dirt path fell away, as I realized that that specific journey was not about where I was going and how I was going to get there, but rather about what MIRACULOUS thing might be journeying towards me!

The word of God came to John in the wilderness, and he went about proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. “The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness: prepare the way!” Prepare the way for the Lord! Not our journey, but God’s journey. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain made low, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Luke’s Gospel takes Baruch’s words, echoing Isaiah – while Baruch hopes for a journey through the desert for his people; John preaches the journey through time and space of God towards us.

In this time of commercial business, it is so easy to get wrapped up in the business – the busy-ness - of our Christian journey: the Sunday services, the adult ed forums, the Christmas pageants, the craft events, the dressing up and the singing of carols and the gift-buying. We put our heads to the trail in front of us, as we move along towards Christmas, like crossing a finish line. But, for fear of mixing liturgical seasons here, we are missing the six-foot-tall pink bunny which is coming down the path towards us.

Something wonderful and miraculous and even absurd is on its way. Just imagine that God would choose to be made into fragile flesh. To think that God would choose to be born poor, without honor. What a surprise that God would choose this natural, messy, inconvenient and humble way into the world, and all for what?

For us!

Zechariah reminds us: “God has come to his people and set them free. God has raised up for us a mighty Savior. 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 in the way of peace.”

So, put down your shopping lists. Rest your weary feet, lift up your heads from the trail, and witness the wonder of God, journeying always towards us.

Amen.