

“Hope Works”

November 29, 2020 (Covid 37 – Live Stream 13)
Isaiah 40:1-5; Mark 1:1-5

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Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent. Though winter doesn't officially begin for almost another month it feels like we have shifted seasons ...from construction to winter. One member of our church, a truck driver, will be happy about that. He's always complaining, especially when he has to drive into Quebec and he sees the signs that say "Travaux". Usually those signs don't actually mean work, they just mean traffic jams and significant delays.

In 2005 my husband and I visited Zambia, where I was born. We connected with so many wonderful people. On one occasion we were driving to church with a new friend. The going was pretty slow because the potholes were enormous. I can remember telling our host that old joke that in Canada there are not 4 seasons but only 2 seasons: winter and construction. He solemnly responded "That sounds very nice. In Zambia, we do not have a construction season." It was one of those moments that make you realize how fortunate we are. Not that we are feeling terribly fortunate this year.

It is kind of amazing to me how much our context changes the way we see and experience a regular event. I feel like this whole Advent and Christmas season has a different colour to it than last year's season did. When we go through the traditional themes of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, it all feels so different this year.

How could it not? It would be the same if in this year you lost a loved one. Whenever you have had a significant life shift, it just changes the quality and texture of an ordinary event. This year the whole world is going through this pandemic and for those who celebrate Christmas, it profoundly changes it.

This Sunday is the Sunday of hope. How do we find hope in a time of pandemic? What is hope?

Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is not fantasizing about living on a desert island with Pina Colodas and tropical music. Hope is an awareness of the current reality – which ain't so pretty– combined with a God-given dream and the desire to get from A to B.

Hope holds in tension what isn't, what should be and the road to get you there. What's the name of the road? –*Travaux!*



A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." –Isaiah 40:3-5

'Make straight in the desert a highway. Valleys lifted up, mountains and hills made low' – sounds like a job for Infrastructure Ontario, a good engineering crew and lots of hard-working construction crews. But this is the work of Advent, this is the work of hope.

In terms of our faith, Advent is a construction season. So is Lent, but let's take it one season at a time. In terms of our culture, this is a time of busy shopping and preparations for Christmas. Here we are on the first Sunday of Advent flanked by Black Friday and Cyber Monday. A time to consume, more, more and more.

This pandemic has been incredibly difficult, but there have been blessings on the journey. I would suggest that while we wouldn't choose it, the fact that Christmas will be very different this year presents a blessing if we are open to seeing it.

Perhaps this is an opportunity to enter into the Advent season, *not the way culture wants us to*, with a frenzy of shopping, parties and overindulging in food and drink, but in the way that leads us closer to God. I long so much more this year for those words – Hope, Peace, Joy, Love – to be real and live in me. Hope is about the work of preparing the way of the Lord. This is an inside and an outside job.

What needs work inside you? What can you do that would bring more of God's love into your life? Do you need to do some forgiveness work? Do you need to commit to working through an addiction through the time-tested 12 steps? Do you need to work through your grief with a counsellor?

An organization called the Canadian Grief Alliance has been pushing the federal government for a national strategy to help people cope with the increased loss society is facing. The loss we have experienced this year is high, and grief is the natural outcome. But if you don't work through it, it can have unwanted mental and physical health consequences. And it doesn't just affect you badly; believe me it affects people around you too, sometimes the ones we love the most.

But the work of preparing the way of the Lord is also outside work. I was saddened to hear earlier this week that Fred Sasakamoose had died of Covid-19 at the age of 86. Fred was one of the first Indigenous people in Canada to play hockey in the NHL.

He played for a time with the Chicago Black Hawks. Fred knew first-hand what was wrong with this country. He grew up going to a residential school and was the victim of physical and sexual abuse while he was there. He had an incredible talent for hockey, and a priest from the school recognized it and trained him to excel. He even arranged for a scout to come and see him when Fred was 16 years old, and that changed everything. Fred's time playing in the NHL was not long, but it broke a barrier, and he became a tremendous inspiration to young indigenous hockey fans and players.



Once his hockey career was over, he used his little bit of fame to make a difference. He developed minor hockey and other sports programs for Indigenous youth— first locally, and then through an initiative that would expand across Saskatchewan. It was for this and other reasons that 2 years ago he received the Order of Canada.



The Order of Canada is the 2nd highest honour for merit in this country (after the order of merit). It recognizes the distinguished service of Canadians who make a major difference to Canada through lifelong contributions. Membership is awarded to those who exemplify the order's Latin motto, *desiderantes meliorem patriam*. It means: "they desire a better country", a phrase taken from the Bible, from Hebrews 11:16. The verse is speaking about faith and the champions of faith through the scriptures, and it reads "*But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*" I like that even better. You know what we say in the Lord's prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

It is so sad and tragic that Fred lost his life to Covid-19, but I am grateful for his life. I am grateful that in spite of and perhaps through his great suffering he helped to make this country a better place. (Hope: seeing what isn't, what should be and walking the road to get from a to b).

Only 7,212 have received the order since its creation in 1967. Not many will receive it. But we are all called to this 'travaux,' inside ourselves

and beyond ourselves to make a difference and to make the community, the country, the world better for others.

We are called to build a highway in the desert places where there are so many obstacles. Why? So that the glory of God can be seen.

I've told this story before, but I can't help but think of it in this context of the construction work of Advent.

On a snowy December morning in the 1960's my dad, Alan Bennett, was working in a government office in downtown Toronto when a visitor walked in. The man was so out of context that it took my dad a couple of minutes to place him. He was not from Toronto, but from Ottawa, where my dad had grown up. They had not met in government circles, but at Mackay United Church, where this man was an elder.

The visitor didn't waste any time – he got straight to the point. *“You know, Al,” he said, “Christmas is coming, and just like Joseph and Mary, we're all on the road to Bethlehem. But the road is strewn with obstacles and barriers that we have to climb over. There are some people who have the gift to remove those barriers and help others along the way. You are one of those people. You can clear away the barriers on the road to Bethlehem.”*

Apparently, that was just about all he said, and then he walked out. My dad called that encounter “the visit from the angel.” It was because of that visit that my father changed his career path, enrolled in theology college and became a professional at removing those barriers and preparing the way for people to meet Jesus.

But the work is not just for ministers. The work is for everyone, especially for those of us who have committed our lives to Jesus. If travaux/ work is not the most appealing word to you, let me assure you that the work of the Lord is the most satisfying you will ever experience. Inside you will feel rivers of healing and life. And outside, if you want to feel like you are part of something larger, part of the ongoing Creation of God in the world, part of giving new life to people, part of shining a light in the darkness, then come and show up for the work of God. The benefits are out of this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.