

Preparing the World

Advent Discoveries:

Isaiah 40:1-5

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The throng of shoppers grew all night. It filled sidewalks and stretched across the parking lot at Green Acres Mall. At 3:30 a.m., police were called. An officer using a bullhorn pleaded with the restive crowd for order. Tension grew as the 5 a.m. Black Friday, Wal-Mart opening neared. Someone taped up a crude poster: “Blitz Line Starts Here.” By 4:55, with no police officers in sight, the crowd of more than 2,000 could be held back no longer. Fists banged and shoulders pressed on the sliding-glass double doors. They bowed in. Inside the store, about six workers pushed the glass back. Suddenly, the doors shattered, and the shrieking mob surged through in a rush for holiday bargains. A 34-year-old worker was thrown back and trampled. Others who stood with him also were hurled back and run over. Some workers saw what happened and fought their way against the surge to get to the man, but he was dead. Four others were injured in the stampede and treated at a local hospital. Some shoppers were shocked. One of them said the crowd acted like “savages.” Kimberly Cribbs said they behaved badly even as the store was cleared: “When they were saying (shoppers) had to leave, that an employee got killed, people were yelling, ‘I’ve been in line since yesterday morning,’ and they kept shopping.”

Five days later, the man’s family filed a lawsuit against Wal-Mart. Certainly, they bear some responsibility; however, we must also see that something dark and disturbing turned a festive crowd into a lethal, self-centered mob. Isn’t Christmas shopping the antithesis? We are celebrating the joys of Christmas and the privilege of giving. If it is Christmas, aren’t we

shopping for gifts, things to unselfishly give away? Or are we buying more for ourselves? Is our Christmas generosity degenerating into a selfish spending binge?

Many stores extend their hours to assist people in their shopping, and the Friday after Thanksgiving the balance sheets of these stores go from red-debt to black-profit, thus Black Friday. However, as stores offer a few exaggerated deals to attract shoppers, are they fostering naked, selfish greed rooted in their own greed? It is one thing to be a good manager and carefully spend your money. It is quite another “to love your neighbor as yourself” and race against her for some huge bargain (or for a parking spot). Why do we think it is okay? Are we letting the thoughts and practices of the crowd determine our attitude, actions and values?

I doubt that a single Wal-Mart shopper saw the danger of his or her attitudes and actions. Egging one another on, playfully at first, and then impatiently as statements here and there grew darker, they pounded on and pushed against the glass doors. Unwittingly, they became killers.

This is the world we live in. It is a world where God’s estranged children unwittingly become deceived and embrace attitudes and actions that destroy themselves and others. It is the world to which God sent his son to be born as an infant. It is the world for which his Son suffered and died. It is the world he loves, and the world he must judge. We live in the advent of God’s final rescue and judgment. Advent marks the birth of our salvation in a stable of Bethlehem and the completion of our salvation in the return of our risen Lord. We are called to prepare our lives for his return, and we are commanded to prepare our world for him! Listen.

A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” (Isaiah 40:3, NIV)

Clearly the world is not ready for God. It is not prepared for Christ’s return. Clearly God is calling us to prepare now. Obstacles must be removed. We must build a straight highway.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. (Isaiah 40:4, NIV)

Mountains hinder the approach of Christ. Valleys prevent his return. We must address rough ground and rugged spots. Why? What is the problem?

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. (Isaiah 40:5, NIV)

Almost 20 years ago, we moved our family to a sparsely populated, flat portion of Minnesota. We would Christmas shop in towns 25, 55 and 115 miles away. The shortened days meant we would return home at night with the snow covered landscape magnifying the light of distant communities. On those return trips we could see the lights of dozens of communities from a single vantage point. People 20 miles away could see the same thing we saw. We shared the same vision. No mountain, no valley and no buildings blocked are vision. All who lived and traveled there saw it. Together we saw it.

Similarly, God is waiting on us to prepare the way for him to enter our world so that all mankind together will see his awesome glory. How do we prepare our world? How do we build this highway? How do we bring down mountains, fill in valleys and smooth out paths?

When God visited on Christmas, he prepared the way with shepherds. He sent messengers to them. They responded by visiting the Christ child in Bethlehem. Their act opened their own eyes and hearts and that of Jesus' parents to see God's glory in an infant. As a result, the shepherds shared their excitement with others. They spread the word. They filled in the valley, lowered the mountain, and smoothed out the rough spot for other people. Their testimonies helped others see.

God calls us to the same task as those shepherds. We may not herd sheep, but in three ways we are like them. You personally are like them.

First, like the shepherds, God has sent messengers to you. You've been told about the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. You've been told that whoever repents and believes in Jesus, whoever trusts in his sacrifice for sins receives eternal life. You've been promised that Jesus will baptize you, pouring on you the Spirit of sonship that spiritually and emotionally reconnects you to God as his child. You'll naturally cry out to God, "Papa!" You've been accosted with this message from heaven.

Second, like those shepherds, you can meet Jesus. You need not travel to a manger. You can call on him right here. Admitting your sinfulness, confessing your belief in him, you can ask him to both save you from the guilt and grip of your sins, and baptize you with his Spirit. Jesus said himself:

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11-13, NIV)

Jesus works in partnership with your Heavenly Father to give you the Spirit of adoption so that you develop the intimacy with God of the same nature as Jesus.

Third, as you grow in intimacy with your heavenly Father, you will experience things the shepherd couldn't imagine. You'll learn to obey the voice of God. You'll open eyes as people see the things God directs you to do. You'll open hearts as people hear your unfolding story of how God reaches out to you with forgiving and transforming love.

As you follow the example of those Judean shepherds, you will fill in the valley of despair for some, you'll tear down the mountain of self-righteousness for others, and you'll smooth out the ground of bitterness as well. You'll prepare our world to see the completion of its salvation.