Building Roads of Peace

December 6, 2009 (Second Sunday of Advent)

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Luke 3:5)

Some time last night I started worrying about clearing roads – our first winter snow, and I couldn't remember if I'd mailed the plowing contract to our snow removal service. Unlike the mythical Santa Claus with his flying sleigh and eight tiny reindeer, I have to make do with front wheel drive.

I mention Santa Claus, because today is the feast day of St. Nicholas. Before he was that jolly old elf, before he was merged into Germanic folklore about Odin, the *real* Saint Nicholas was bishop of Myra, a port town in what is now Turkey. Nicholas took part in his episcopal offices, representing his diocese when the churches met to write what would become the Nicene Creed.

But Nicholas was known especially for his practical generosity, his compassion for the vulnerable poor, especially children and young people. He stayed in the Holy Land for some time and lived in a cave that is preserved as a place of pilgrimage in the church named for him in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem. Many Palestinian Christians see him as their patron saint.

This year, Episcopal churches across the US are celebrating the feast of Saint Nicholas
by connecting his compassion for young children in need with the ministries of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem. The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem helps children and families in need as they operate two major hospitals, schools, parishes and 35 service organizations in Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

There have been Arab Christians in the Holy Land for two-thousand years, ever since that first Pentecost. There have been Anglican churches there since 1841, and during the 19th and 20th centuries, somewhere between a quarter and a third of the Arab community were Christians. That number has dropped to about 2% in Israel and Palestine as families have emigrated, fled, or had their homes and fields bulldozed. Telling the story of Arab Christians is harder than driving in snow, however. It's why I'm up here in the pulpit, preaching from a text, instead of extemporizing.

Increasingly, the three great Abrahamic faiths – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – have been taken hostage and misused for political ends. Last week I spoke about *apocalypticism*, a hopeless fixation on the destructive power of God's judgment. As we continue to wrestle with these stories in our scripture, we have to acknowledge the fringe of our own Christian community.

There are millenarian Christians who believe that in order for the Second Coming to come about, Christians, Muslims, and secular Jews must be driven out of Jerusalem and a new temple constructed where the Masjid alAqsa is today (and, in their violent theology, Christ would then send those remaining Jews to hell).

Let me be clear here: Faith does not lead to violence, any more than violence leads to faith. It has become fashionable to declare that if we were just to remove religion, the world would become a peaceful place – an assertion that ignores the bare fact that many of the worst acts of violence this past century were carried out by atheists and secularist governments. In fact, faith can lead to peace, to dialogue, to understanding. Bishop Suheil Dawani, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, declared "The ministry to which I am called demolishes walls of hatred and separation, and builds bridges of peace."

In the last few weeks, I've had the chance to talk with pilgrims from Good Shepherd, Watertown, who have just come back from Palestine and Israel; with board members and staff at Jewish Voices for Peace; with a family friend, Yehezkel Landau, who is a rabbi, professor and Israeli citizen; with staff members at Grassroots International, partnering with Palestinian farmers in Gaza and the West Bank; with my father-in-law who was in Jerusalem two weeks ago.

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Christians, Muslims and Jews who know that it is possible to criticize the policies of the government of Israel without falling into the sin of anti-Semitism, without belittling the pain or denying the reality of the Holocaust, without whitewashing the violence and injustice carried out against Jews as well as against Palestinians.

They have met with families on both sides who have faced violence. They have witnessed families evicted from their homes, ancestral olive groves torn down, and seen the wide highways built to connect settlements -- roads that divide homes from fields, and split villages in half, roads that are ironic echoes of Isaiah's vision, bringing not justice but division, high-walled, limited-access settlement highways dividing the land into smaller and smaller pieces.

Roads *are* means of occupation and control, the wide roads of the Roman Empire built to support invading legions. Our own great interstates were built originally as part of a national defense system; "Interstate" is simply shorthand for "Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways." I don't think it's any coincidence that Luke precedes his imagery of road-building with a list of kings and emperors and high priests. *We know the roads that Rome has built for their armies*, Luke is saying, *straight wide roads of the imperium. But we are building a different road, The Way of the Lord.*

As I've spoken with people who have spent time in the Holy Land, I've learned that they've seen not only settler roads of occupation, but also roads built for peace. They are not concrete highways. They are rougher roads, roads marked out by conversations across race and creed, roads that travel through the rough and contested landscape of history and family.

Roads that serve the nurses and doctors at St. Luke's Anglican Hospital in the West Bank and the medical staff in the Anglican hospital in Gaza, providing medical care for thousands. Roads that help beekeepers in Gaza and olive growers in Nablus, roads that serve Christian and Muslim schoolchildren working together, Roads that bring together Jews and Christians and Muslims, praying and working for peace and reconciliation.

As we hear stories of God's coming justice, as we are called by John to prepare a way, a road for the coming Jesus, what kind of roads shall we build? What kind of roads shall we build in our own communities and in our own lives?

Are they roads reserved for those with power? We can see the fear and anger and xenophobia when we look at such constructions in the West Bank, but the roads we build in our own lives are sometimes more subtle – divisions of race and creed and class at play at our jobs and in our schools, in the lessons we teach to our children.

As Christians, what kind of roads shall we build? Will we help to build roads where *all* travel peacefully -- whether they are roads in the Holy Land, or the paths we tread in our daily lives, roads not just for a few but, as the Prophet wrote, for all flesh?

When we work here at Messiah to make sure our neighbors are fed and sheltered in the winter, when we cross divisions of distance and race and culture to build a library in South Africa, when we are willing to talk to one another about those things which divide us, when we teach our children here about the boundless love of God, we are preparing the way for Christ:

"the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Some of the organizations that helped inform this sermon include:

American Friends of the Diocese of Jerusalem
www.americanfriends-jerusalem.org

The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem
www.j-diocese.org

Grassroots International
www.grassrootsonline.org

Open House
www.openhouse.org.il

Jewish Voices for Peace
www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org

Sabeel
www.sabeel.org

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