

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

9 December, 2018

1st Reading Baruch 5:1–9

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 126:1–2,2–3,4–5,6

2nd Reading Philippians 1:4–6,8–11

Gospel Luke 3:1–6

When I was younger, I read *The Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and one scene in particular came to mind as I was reflecting on today's readings. In this scene, Pa Ingalls had taken Laura out to see the railroad worksite where men were working to bring the railroad through their town and then on westward. Upon arriving at the worksite, Laura saw a fascinating process: at the head of the line men were digging with pick and shovel, taking the top off of a hill along the railroad's path. The dirt from this digging was being loaded into wagons which were then hauled by horses a hundred feet or so back onto a scaffolding. This scaffolding had been built over a hollow in the landscape. Here the dirt was dumped and then tamped into a firm foundation for the rail bed. The men working on the railroad were literally making the hills low and raising up the low places. They were undertaking this radical change in geography in order to make the passage of the train easier. As was explained to Laura, trains do not like climbing hills or winding their way around countless curves. All this effort, just to move some dirt a few hundred feet, was to make the eventual coming of the train faster and more efficient.

Today's readings, not once but twice, contain the injunction that the mountains are to be made low and the valley's raised up. They order the exact radical change in geography as Laura saw in the scene I just described. Through the mouth of Baruch in our first reading God issues this order so that Israel, God's people, may advance unimpeded as they are restored. In the Gospel of Luke, Isaiah's version of the image is used to describe the ministry of John the Baptist. In this instance it is the LORD's own path which is readied. The mountains are made low and the valley's raised up so that Jesus himself may come more easily and lead the people of Israel, the Church.

In both cases the language is metaphorical; God is not impeded by something so mundane as a hill or a hollow. The path that needs to be leveled is not a physical one, it is the path into our hearts: yours, mine, the heart of everyone in the world. It is hills and hollows of human making which we are called to tear down and fill in to make straight the path for the Lord.

That's right, I said "we are called" to this task. I have to admit that when I've read these passages in the past I have always thought of them as talking

about John the Baptist. He is the one that came to prepare the way for Jesus back in Palestine some 2000 years ago. It is through his preaching, his baptizing, his ministry that the people of his day were alerted to the coming of Jesus and the beginning of his earthly ministry. Our readings today serve to remember that event.

But as I read and reflected on these readings this past week, it struck me that I was mistaken. This is *not* actually how the image is used. Luke does not describe John as preparing the way of the LORD, rather he uses the words of Isaiah to describe John's *proclamation*. *John* is the one telling people to prepare the way of the LORD. It is through his mouth that the instruction to fill in the valleys and lower the mountains and hills is delivered to his hearers, to us even. We are among the ones tasked with this job; John is the foreman, the company representative, delivering the orders; orders, we are assured by Baruch, which come straight from the top, from God Himself. God has commanded this dramatic realignment of geography and given us the task of making this highway ready for Him.

What a privilege this is! To be asked by God Himself to do something for Him. And not just anything, but to have a role in Jesus's mission to the world. Jesus doesn't simply save us, he makes it possible for us to participate in our own salvation and the salvation of others!

Following through on the image, we are the men and women with the picks and shovels and wagons who have to go about shifting the dirt to make the path level. Our share in the work of God is hard, sometimes exhausting labor. Sometimes it seems like we're digging in the wrong place or that the hill we've been asked to level is made of stuff too hard to dig. Sometimes our fellow workers appear to be slacking off or, even worse, actively sabotaging the effort. And of course, there are plenty of people willing to tell us that we're wasting our time: there is no train coming and we might as well get on with making money or enjoying ourselves or whatever the distraction of the day happens to be. Why spend time in Church when we could be watching a football game, going out to eat, or catching a few extra Z's?

At other times we can get discouraged. We can feel like our contribution is not important. We may even want to give up. It would be so much easier, after all, to simply worry about ourselves. To worry about our own family and friends and let the rest of the world look after itself. Why go through the trouble of caring about others if they don't care about us?

It is in the face of these temptations that the Church, every year, brings us back to the coming of the LORD, not just in the past, but in the future as well. Each Advent we are invited to recommit ourselves to that future coming, to listen to the words of Baruch and Isaiah and John the Baptist that preceded the past coming and realize that *we* are called to prepare the way of the LORD; to level the mountains and fill in the valleys. It is, no doubt, hard and sometimes dirty work; shifting dirt often is, but we do it because God has asked it of us and we know that what He asks, He asks for our benefit.