

Sermon: To Move a Mountain

Scriptures Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

I suspect that John the Baptist and Isaiah were both a little crazy. Think about this morning's Scripture readings. What did Isaiah mean when he said "every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low?" What kind of power does it take to level a mountain and fill in a valley?

Here's one way to do that (show volcano video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=CgpNqrR318U>). How would you describe that?

[get responses and make the following points:

Powerful

terrifying

traumatic

cataclysmic

irrevocable

messy

destructive]

When you think about a volcanic eruption like this one, there is a timeline of events that occurs. It looks something like this: [slide #1]

There are other ways to move a mountain besides earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. It still takes a lot of energy and power, it's still messy and difficult, it still destroys a lot of stuff and takes a long time, but if someone wanted to get rid of a mountain, they could use TNT and blasting equipment and big earth moving Caterpillars, like construction crews use to make roads.

Think about what it took to create I-90, our NYS Thruway. To construct a mere 500 miles of superhighway, it cost \$600 million in the 1950's and took decades to complete. Construction companies used all kinds of destructive forces to create manmade channels through stone mountains to make it easier for cars to drive – they made the path 'straighter, less hilly.' This past summer they began a \$100 million reconstruction project to fix just a few miles of that highway. **On top of all the things we said before, it is also tremendously costly to move mountains and fill in valleys.**

Even doing it slowly with road construction, it still follows our timeline of mountain moving events in many ways. They talk, raise money, do studies, get engineers involved all before the first shovel of dirt is moved.

When Isaiah says that we need to prepare for the coming of the Lord by "making straight in the desert a highway for our God!" what was he talking about? How is blowing up mountains and moving the rubble into the valleys something that will bring us comfort??!! What mountain are we moving and why?

Let's look at the context in which this was spoken. Israel was going into captivity in Babylon. All hope for freedom and prosperity was gone. They were being punished for their lack of obedience to God. On the eve of this devastation, Isaiah speaks a word they could take comfort in. It will not always be like this, he says. A time will come when the Lord will bring deliverance, with might he will overcome their bondage. It will be messy and painful, but God promised to do it.

Isaiah's prophecy talks about much more than one discreet moment in time. God's promise of deliverance began in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve disobeyed, sin brought bondage. It affected the entire created world. No longer was everything perfect. Suddenly there was a wall between God and humanity. The wall was too high, too long, too deep to get around. Remember that song?

So high, can't get over it

So deep can't get under it

So wide can't get around it

O, bless my soul.

The mountain of sin would have to be destroyed. Isaiah's prophecy fits into a similar kind of timeline which you could think about like this: [slide #2]

How will God destroy the mountain that separates humanity from God? What is his tool of choice to make straight the path of salvation? He chose the most powerful weapon of all. Love.

This weapon came in the most unexpected package. In his infinite wisdom, with his vast power and wisdom, in his magnificent omnipotence, he crammed the incredible magnitude of God in all God's glory and power into a single human cell. He took the infinite and placed it in a microscopic bit of flesh and tucked it in a dark womb.

This speck of divinity, this **power** beyond anything we could imagine was harnessed by bone and sinew and muscle. Imagine what it took to accomplish that! It was the visible sign of the earth-shaking mountain-moving restoration of God's children.

Did you ever wonder why the Bible talks about what John the Baptist wore? What difference did it make that he wore a camel hair shirt with a leather belt? I have always been bothered by that. How incongruous. Who would go listen to a crazy person who wore clothes that intentionally irritated his body as a type of enforced discipline and penance for sin?

I wonder if we can see something symbolic in that. John came to prepare the way for Jesus. Perhaps this was his way of showing how difficult it must have been for the creator to put on creation, for the divine to be clothed in humanity. Can we for a moment grasp how Jesus must have felt when he took on human form?

What an incredible sacrifice to willingly put on flesh. It was costly for him to become a baby. We think that Jesus' sacrifice began on the cross. But I think it began at the moment of conception. I think it began with the incarnation.

When we think of a baby, we think of holding a newborn *after* it has gone through the trauma of being born. Hold a baby in your arms. Look into its precious face. See a quiet, sweet little face filled with peace and contentment. How adorable.

We forget all the agony it took for that baby to arrive! They don't call it labor for nothing. Ask any woman who has had a child. She will tell you how hard and painful it is. Mary was no different. She didn't just miraculously blink and tah-dah! A perfect baby. She felt the pain of labor, she sweated. She groaned. She pushed. It was a **messy** process.

Having a baby is **traumatic**. It's **cataclysmic**. It's **irrevocable**. It's **terrifying**. Just like moving a mountain. Think how being born must feel to all babies. Jesus went through that with far more impact than any human child.

Being born is not fun. How do I know? What do babies do immediately after they are born? They CRY! If being born were a joyful experience, babies would laugh great big belly laughs of joy. But they don't - they cry. Jesus cried.

Did the angels scream in horror as they watched the torture and agony, the hurt and pain Jesus was enduring in being born? No! They did what we do when a baby is born. They CELEBRATED! They called all the relatives (think shepherds) – hey look – it's a baby!

Jesus was so much more than just a baby. He was relief for a sin torn world. After centuries of suffering and sin and bondage, Jesus' birth was the first eruption, the first tangible sign that God was at work restoring our fellowship with Him. Jesus' birth was part of the process of creating a smooth and level highway by which the world can return to God. Jesus **POWER** erupts in the incarnation, set free by the pain of delivery.

Crazy John broke with Temple tradition to offer a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Up until then, sin was taken care of by placing your hand on the head of a lamb, transferring your sin to the animal, and then killing the lamb. Why did John tell people that they could repent of their sin not through the sacrifice of lambs but with washing of the water.

Why water? How do you know when a baby is about to make an appearance? The pregnant woman's water breaks. When Jesus was born, the delivery process for the whole world began. So there was John, and water, and promise of deliverance all wrapped up in the power and pain and trauma of Jesus' divine human birth.

The priests of the Temple thought John was just a crazy person, but John had felt the tremors of the earthquake that was about to hit. He knew how traumatic, how cataclysmic, how irrevocable the upcoming events would be. "Get ready!" he shouted.

The Promise is coming. Behold, believe and be baptized! Mountains are moving. The walls of sin and death are tumbling!!! He knew the incarnation was full eruption and that the crucifixion and resurrection were not far behind.

[slide #2]

Isaiah's words looked forward not just to the manger, but on beyond to the second coming. We still look forward to Christ's return. There's more to come. Are we ready? Have we prepared ourselves for this final cataclysmic earth-shaking event? Are we making our own paths straight through repentance and growing in the grace of God?

II Peter 3:10 tells us

"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, **what kind of people ought you to be?** You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him."

What kind of people ought we to be? Not hunkering down on the side of Mt St. Helens assuming that the worst is over and we are safe. The grass has grown over the destruction and we can get comfortable. We ought to always be aware of that final coming earthquake.

Isaiah and John call us to make straight our path by living live holy and godly lives and to make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

May it be so in our lives this Advent season.