

## “Healing the Wasteland”

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Isaiah 40:1-5

Mark 1:29-39

*A voice cries:*

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,*

*Make straight in the desert a highway for our God...” Isa. 40:3 [RSV]*

*“... the voice of one crying in the wilderness:*

*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight—” Mark 1:3 [RSV]*

Let us pray... O God,

We listen for your voice, calling us to come out of the wilderness,  
out of the wasteland and make our way towards you.

But we also watch for how you are with us already  
in the midst of that wasteland.

Amen

On the second floor of the Boston Public Library in a side room,  
there is a series of wall paintings right along the edge of the ceiling.

They are by Edwin Austin Abbey on the theme of

“The Quest and Achievement of the Holy Grail”.

They are in the style of realism that characterized the golden age of illustration  
by Howard Pyle, NC Wyeth, Maxfield Parrish, and Frederick Remington.

There is also ‘An Outline of this Version of the Legend’ by novelist Henry James  
that accompanies a printed set of these paintings.

In this version of the Grail legend, Sir Galahad one of King Arthur’s knights,  
enters a mysterious fortress and sees the Holy Grail in a procession, but fails to  
*...ask the Question, which not only would have delivered*

*[...] the inmates of the [Grail] castle,*

*but would have restored peace and plenty to the land.*

*The earth now must remain barren, and Sir Galahad, wandering forth again,  
is followed by the curses of the peasantry,  
while war rages throughout the land.*

*He must encounter many adventures, suffer many sorrows,  
and many years must pass before he returns once more*

*to the Castle of the Grail, where,*

*having through all ordeals remained sinless,*

*he will finally ask the Question*

*which shall redeem the sin-stricken land.*

<http://www.bpl.org/central/abbey.htm>

What ‘Question’ should we be asking?

In what ways are we in a ‘barren’ world - or ‘wasteland’ of the Grail legend?  
We might look at current events and come to that conclusion that things  
are not so great for the state of our union as the United States of America.

Willard, p.2

Right now there is terrible division that threatens the very existence of our nation's union, characterized by scapegoating and obstruction.

How do we heal these divisions?

How do we heal the wasteland our society has become?

Part of the problem may be that we do not have agreement on what the problem is.

There is a lot of effort going on to scapegoat and vilify "the opposition", but nobody is really asking, "What is the problem?" and at least agreeing about that.

Until we do, then the ignorance about each other's position – and the 'wasteland' that this creates, will continue.

When there is agreement on a problem, then it doesn't even matter what solutions are put forward, because the goal will be the same.

To get to that place of agreement requires a willingness to listen to the other side's point of view – to have empathy for all involved; And that requires some roadwork within – from the head to the heart.

Our lesson from Isaiah recalls a time when the Jewish people found themselves freed by the Persians from Babylonian captivity.

It was then that 'a voice' was calling to them to make a path in the wilderness or "wasteland", for a physical journey to get back home to God.

In the Gospel of Mark, that verse is reinterpreted so that the 'voice' is calling from *within* the wasteland.

The voice of God is right in there amongst the people stuck in the wasteland and that 'voice' was John the Baptist announcing the advent of Christ.

What this suggests is that the journey we need to make these days – and the infrastructure that has to be constructed, is an internal one.

We don't necessarily need the same vision for how to fix things.

We need the same Spirit in how we approach each other with our solutions.

The Holy Grail of the medieval legend is a metaphor for the cup of Christ, the cup of forgiveness, as Jesus said in Matthew 26:28,

"...for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

There is a debate about who the word 'many' refers to, but the Grail legend suggests that this means 'multitudes' – as in potentially *all* people.

In this Spirit, we here at UCC at The Villages, have provided a meeting place for Muslims and Jews to gather with us Christians for worship together.

Willard, p.3

That does not mean converting them to Christianity,  
but it is my belief that our job as Christians, is to help people  
become who they are –

This does not mean a license to ‘do your own thing’  
without concern for the consequences to others and yourself.

But the more we set ourselves to the task of  
building bridges of fellowship across the abyss of fear  
and blasting out tunnels in the mountains of ignorance,  
the closer we get to becoming a beloved community we can all call home  
‘on Earth as it is in Heaven’.

Here are some problems requiring some bi-partisan “collusion”:

Persistent impoverishment of the middle class  
despite stock market success – that is, up until last Friday;  
School shootings and mass murders despite stubbornly protected gun rights;  
Gestapo-style ICE arrests; the public rise of racist organizations;  
Unjust violence in the name of law enforcement,  
provoking Black Lives Matter protests;  
Sexual harassment and abuse in the work place and elsewhere  
provoking the Metoo and Timesup movements;  
Intrusive cyberattacks,  
foreign and domestic;  
Prolonged disaster recovery and the unwillingness to act on climate change –  
even the willful dismantling of environmental protections;  
Wars overseas and the displacement of refugees  
and reluctance to provide humanitarian aid and resettlement;  
And last but not least, a nation-wide opioid epidemic –  
which may very well be linked to all the above.

We are faced with numerous all-or-nothing ‘false equivalences’ such as:

Helping undocumented immigrants means ignoring poor white people –  
which provokes the question why are

poor white people being ignored in the first place?

Empowering women in the workplace means disempowering men –  
which provokes the question why wouldn’t everyone benefit

from fair compensation and a safer work environment?

Kneeling during the anthem at football games as disrespect to our flag –  
which provokes what else could be done to start discussion & change

about police violence against unarmed black people;

Gun control legislation means a threat to Second Amendment rights –  
which provokes the question why wouldn’t we want

to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people?

Willard, p.4

Perhaps another problem for our consideration

are the various screens of technology –

cell phones, smart phone, I-pads, PCs laptops, and flat-screen TVs,  
which we daily consult at the expense of meaningful face to face conversations.

FCC Chair, Newt Minow, warned us that:

*When television is good, nothing –*

*not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers – nothing is better.*

*But when television is bad, nothing is worse.*

*I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set*

*when your station goes on the air and stay there for a day*

*without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper,*

*without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you.*

*Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off.*

*I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.*

He said this in 1961.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton\\_N.\\_Minow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton_N._Minow)

Maybe that would be a good place to start as a problem we can all agree upon  
to start paving the way for God's Spirit of cooperation to work through us  
to transform the wasteland into a beloved community.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Isaiah 40:1-5 in the Common English Version,  
is a reference to the end of the Babylonian captivity,  
calling God's people to make their way home through the wilderness...*

<sup>1</sup>Our God has said:

“Encourage my people! Give them comfort.

<sup>2</sup> Speak kindly to Jerusalem and announce:

Your slavery is past; your punishment is over.

I, the LORD, made you pay double for your sins.”

<sup>3</sup> Someone is shouting:

“Clear a path in the desert!

Make a straight road for the LORD our God.

<sup>4</sup> Fill in the valleys; flatten every hill and mountain.

Level the rough and rugged ground.

<sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the LORD will appear for all to see.

The LORD has promised this!”

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Mark 1:29-39

- 29 And immediately [Jesus] left the synagogue,  
and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John.
- 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever,  
and immediately they told him of her.
- 31 And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her;  
and she served them.
- 32 That evening, at sundown,  
they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.
- 33 And the whole city was gathered together about the door.
- 34 And he healed many who were sick with various diseases,  
and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak,  
because they knew him.
- 35 And in the morning, a great while before day,  
he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed.
- 36 And Simon and those who were with him pursued him,  
37 and they found him and said to him,  
"Every one is searching for you."
- 38 And he said to them,  
"Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also;  
for that is why I came out."
- 39 And he went throughout all Galilee,  
preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.