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Advent 2B: Luke 3:1-6

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I don't really think much about the roads often.

I only think about them when they slow me down,

if there's construction or a wreck or volume,

when I'm furiously reporting on Waze that the Pike is at a standstill AGAIN.

I rarely stop to consider how roads

have connected farflung friends and family,

how they have made many, though not all,

people's quality of life better by enabling trade,

allowing for more specialization,

thus enabling us to take more advantage of economies of scale.

Roads make things that would have been unimaginable

so mundane that we take them for granted.

Roads are powerful.

So much has changed since biblical times

And yet roads were even more powerful then.

Land travel was popular then for the reasons it remains popular now:

it's flexible

it's more affordable

However, land travel used to be **much** more dangerous
and way way WAY more time consuming,
Good roads were few and far between,
and far more expensive, relatively speaking,
to build and maintain.

One of the quickest ways an ancient leader could demonstrate his power was
through building roads.

Today's reading from Luke introduces John the baptizer as an adult.

John quotes the prophet Isaiah when he says:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

When John is speaking here, the ancient Roman road system was in its Golden Age.

Romans roads were famously well-built,
wonderfully engineered,

The Roman roads stretched from Britain to modern day Iraq;
from modern day Germany to Spain and northern Africa.

Roman roads made the crooked straight,

Roman roads made the rough ways smooth.

The Roman roads were how the Roman military conquered this portion of the world.

So for John, the Roman roads symbolize a power of tyranny and cruelty.

John is living in a world where people want

some power other than the Romans,

something new,

something different,

Something other.

When John is talking about preparing the way– he is saying,

“God, be the powerful counterbalance we know you can be.

Help us be like the most powerful road builders ever.”

John is saying, “God, help us. Again.”

The part of Isaiah John references is thought to have been written just after one of the lowest times for God's people-- the Babylonian exile.

Rock bottom was hit and then some.

How many times the people must have whispered, "God, help us. Again.:

Into this time of desolation and despair, help does come.

A powerful ruler.

A strong conqueror

He does overthrow Babylon.

He allows-- even encourages!-- the next generation

to return to the Holy Land

to rebuild the temple.

It must have seemed like a miracle, probably because it kind of was.

As an illustration of how powerful Cyrus, that's the person who was sent, is so powerful that he presided over a new road that went

from modern day southwest Iran to

the far western side of what we now call Turkey.

Before this new road, this path took three months.

After the new road, it was cut down to a week!

90 days to 7 days.

Travel time down 92%.

Any business person,
any government official
would just salivate over that type of improvement.

Any employee in their right mind would not want it
because then they'd want you to do it again but better the next fiscal year.

To be able to take credit for such statistically improbable improvements was– is– a baller move, an undeniable display of power and strength. And Cyrus did it.

Cyrus the Great built this road.

Cyrus the Great allowed folks to return to Jerusalem.

This powerful person came to the people's aid during a tough time.

Definitely not of the Davidic line,

One of the primary avenues from which help is supposed to come.

He isn't even a Jew or interested in Judaism at all.

Cyrus is the Persian emperor.

I am not interpreting as much as you might think.

Cyrus is sometimes referred to as the anointed one
in our Old Testament, in the Tanakh.

This is one of those rare times we might be more familiar with the Hebrew than
with the English translation– messiah is Hebrew for anointed one.

God sends an unlikely helper in a time of need,

not the one anyone would have chosen.

Who knows what might happen when someone prays, "God, help us. Again"

One of the reasons we don't pray for God to help us is
that we have a hard time imagining a strong, benevolent power
because we see so many glaring examples
Of power being abused and misused.

We are subject
to an overtaxed, overburdened, broken, wildly expensive
healthcare system that we are constantly told is the best in the world.
So much so that I wrote that sentence before the online reaction to the UHC CEO's ripped
the mask of many people's anger.

The powerful god of convenience seems to be worshipped by us all,
me included,
Environmental long term consequences be damned.

The power of short term profit remains the major measure of success,
nevermind how much it costs
the ability of the company to invest in its on future or
the mental health of employees.

And we do not want to be disappointed and hurt. Again.

So we lock up our hearts,

we bury our hopes.

We relegate benign powerful figures to the stories we whisper to our children or our grandchildren at night.

We don't want to pray "God, help us. Again." Lest we feel ghosted. Again.

The person John the baptizer is asking his listeners and us to prepare for ends up being difficult to understand on a number of fronts.

Though Cyrus was unexpected in his being, he still fit the mold with his actions.

Cyrus the Great got rid of a more oppressive regime.

Cyrus created policies more favorable towards the ancient Israelites.

Jesus did not do something immediately useful like overthrow the Romans,

Jesus did not do something powerful like build better literal roads

Jesus did none of that.

Jesus was and is powerful in a different way.

Jesus expands and makes God's love known to more people,

One of Luke's themes,

the last verse of what John quotes from Isaiah today.

All flesh.

Jesus invites us to connect to one another differently,

To see one another as neighbors,

To draw the circle wider

To hope more

To love more

During this Advent,

God is approaching in unexpected ways. AGAIN.

Like Cyrus, like Jesus,

It very well may not be who we would have chosen for ourselves. AGAIN.

Like Cyrus, like Jesus,

not everything we want done will be done. AGAIN.

God, help us. Again.

Where can we redirect our energy

if we admit what we cannot change

and focus on what we can?

If everything is not just up to us,

can we dream a dream not of times gone by

But of what could be?

Folks who know a lot more than I do about these kinds of things

think we have ways to drastically reduce world hunger, almost zero it out.

We just lack the political will and unity to do it.

What if we lived in a world where we could more clearly see where we can– and cannot–
make a difference, and act accordingly?

God, help us. Again.

Christ is building roads in our hearts, and our minds, and our souls, in our lives in new and different ways, especially now. God, help us. Again.