

Today our readings are from Baruch in the Old Testament
and from the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament.

We read of 2 major infrastructure challenges.

In the Book of Baruch God commands
that every lofty mountain be made low,
and that the age-old depths and gorges
be filled to level ground.

We hear in the Gospel of Luke...

every valley shall be filled
and every mountain and hill be made low.

The winding roads shall be made straight
and the rough ways made smooth.

This may sound like the greatest
infrastructure challenge ever presented.

However, we know that the Words of God...spoken in the Bible...
are meant for our spiritual mountains and valleys...

not the mountains between here and Missoula.

Baruch lived in the time when the Hebrews
were conquered by the Babylonians.

The Hebrews were brought into exile
not just because they were a weaker nation
but they had started to abandon God.

They were paying lip service in the temple

but were practicing pagan rituals outside the temple.

The Hebrews were worshiping the material over the spiritual.

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Once in exile the Hebrews realized
there was no hope to free themselves
except to turn to God to free them.

Baruch prophesied that God would deliver them
when he said to them: "God is leading Israel in joy
by the light of his glory, with his mercy and justice.
Turn to Him and you will again rejoice."

Sometimes our actions today don't look that much different
than those of the Hebrews in Baruch's time.

Too often we physically come to this Church to pray
but we don't worship spiritually.

During this time of Advent and Christmas,
it is too easy to get caught up in the materialism
over the spiritual meaning of this season.

Let's consider a simpler celebration of Christmas
that reflects the importance of gathering loved ones
rather than acquiring new gadgets and clothes.

So let us call upon God to make smooth the path to our hearts
as suggested in both readings.

In our Gospel Reading, Luke reminds us...

by quoting the prophet Isaiah...

who tells us to prepare the way of the Lord.

When a king would go out to visit his subjects,

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he would send slaves and servants ahead

to make sure the roads were clear of any danger or obstacles.

And today's Gospel adds more passages

that tell us that John the Baptist went throughout

the whole region of Jordan,

proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

He was clearing the way and announcing the coming of Jesus,

preparing for the coming of the Lord.

This is imagery meant for us today.

We are being called to do the same thing in a spiritual sense...

that is...to clear any obstacle or sin from our lives

so that Jesus, our King, can come into our hearts...

especially at this time of Advent.

John the Baptist invites us to repent

so that our spiritual weakness and tendency to sin

will not be an obstacle to a path of Holiness with God.

If there is repentance in our hearts

then God's grace will be better able to work in our lives.

So through repentance...which literally means "change of heart"...

we can knock down the mountains of our selfish ego...

fill in the valleys of sin in our lives...

and make a smooth path for Christ

to be birthed in our hearts at Christmas.

Since I have been speaking about our Advent message
of preparing for Christmas,

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let me also say a few words about the other feast day
we celebrate today.

The Feast of the Immaculate Conception.

This always occurs on December 8,

but this time our obligation to attend Mass
occurs on a regular Sunday.

God himself smoothed a path for His Son
to come into the world.

Let me explain this.

In 1854 Pope Pius IX (9th) introduced
the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

A dogma tells us what the Church believes.

The Immaculate Conception is a Catholic dogma
that states Mary...whose conception was brought about
in the normal way by her parents, Saints Joachim and Anne...
but she was conceived without Original Sin or its stain.

That is what Immaculate means: without stain.

The Angel Gabriel stood before Mary and said,

"Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you."

Gabriel expressed a characteristic quality of Mary.

We all received Sanctifying Grace at our Baptism.

Mary received Sanctifying Grace at her Conception.

The analogy I remember from my youth

is of a man who falls into a muddy pit.

Someone reaches down and pulls him out.

The man has been saved from the muddy pit...

but is stained with mud. He needs washed.

Now imagine a woman walking along by the same pit

and is about to topple in...but just before the very moment

she would fall into the muddy pit...someone saves her.

The man and woman were both saved

but the woman was saved in a better way.

She was prevented from getting stained by the mud.

By receiving God's grace at her conception,

Mary was saved from Original Sin and its stain.

Because of Mary's pivot role

in becoming the mother of Jesus and without original sin

we rejoice today and truly honor her.

So, during this time of Advent...

let us all smooth our spiritual paths.

Clean from us the mud of sin
by receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation
and get ready for a holy Christmas.