

*(Im)Perfect Peace*  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 6, 2020  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Isaiah 40:1-11 \(NLT\)](#)

[2 Peter 3:8-14 \(CEB\)](#)

In December of 1906, ships crossing the Atlantic were thrilled with the latest technological marvel – Marconi’s Wireless Telegraph. This compact device only took up a cabin on the ship, but allowed them to remain in touch with shore and with other ships while at sea! Crew members frequently stopped by to take a spare listening tube and be mesmerized by the rapid sequence of beeps, heralding a message in Morse Code. But on Christmas Eve of that year, wireless operators from Newfoundland to Norfolk heard something other than beeps. At first, they couldn’t identify the sound, but as they hunted a better frequency, it turned out to be a violin, playing “O Holy Night” – and then a man’s voice, singing the third verse: “Truly, he taught us to love one another; his law is love, and his gospel is peace.” The voice went on to read scripture, wish everyone a merry Christmas, and then invited them to listen to their next broadcast, on New Year’s Eve. “O Holy Night,” then, has the distinction of being the first song ever played on the radio!

But, there was something troubling about that broadcast – as it was being sent out over a wide range of frequencies, and at high power, it interfered with the communication of the ships for around 20 minutes. At that time, of course, wireless telegraphy was not relied on, as it was just out of the experimental stage, but it still made an impact.

Sometimes, in making the way forward, even when preaching peace, there is disruption. Disturbing the peace may be needed to usher in a new, less imperfect peace.

That’s part of the idea behind Isaiah’s famous words to the exiles: “Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a highway straight through the wasteland for our God! Fill in the valleys, level the mountains and hills, straighten

the curves, and smooth the rough places.” We’ve grown used to hearing this verse, but just think of the work involved in literally following this – it’s a massive undertaking. The landscape will be forever altered. And for what purpose? Why do we need a perfectly level path for God to approach, for the “Glory of the LORD” to be revealed?

It’s not immediately obvious, but it is not God who needs the path – but those who are feeling separated, exiled from their home. After all, Isaiah tells *Zion* – the mountain on which the Temple sits - to shout the good news from its peak. “Tell the *towns of Judah* your God is coming!” For where is God? With the people! God is *returning* to Jerusalem, carrying the “baby lambs” and leading the mother sheep, feeding the whole flock along the way.

Preparing a highway in the wilderness is a task to welcome the exiled home – to make the journey easier on those who have suffered! Yes, it changes the landscape – it trades the natural beauty for the human-made roadway – but it is done to honor God and have compassion on those who are struggling.

That compassion is something evidenced in the story of the composition of “O Holy Night,” too. A French priest wanted a special song to dedicate the new organ, and he approached a wine merchant named Placide Cappeau to write the lyrics. This was a surprising choice, for though Msr. Cappeau was known in town for writing poetry, he rarely attended church. Yet, he agreed to write the song, and, in the course of a long carriage ride from Avignon to Paris, he set down the entirety of the lyrics. However, Msr. Cappeau was not much of a composer, and so he approached another unusual choice to set a tune to the lyrics – a Jewish man named Adolphe Adam, who wrote music for Parisian orchestras and ballets. Msr. Adam agreed to write the music, and in just two days, on December 6, 1847, returned the completed score to Msr. Cappeau. It was performed at the midnight mass, that Christmas Eve, and gained in popularity throughout the French speaking world.

However, Msr. Cappeau ended up leaving the church entirely, and when it was discovered that neither the lyricist nor the composer were Christian, the

Archbishop declared the song “unfit for church services” because of its “total absence of the spirit of religion.”

Fortunately, that’s not the end of the story – God had other plans for “O Holy Night!” Though it was officially banned from performance in the Catholic church, people kept singing the song in their homes, and it spread eventually to French-speaking Canada, where a Unitarian pastor translated it into English. Published in 1855, his translation included this as part of the third verse: “Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease.”

Because of this verse, the song became very popular among abolitionists, and it was sung as a protest hymn throughout the year, not just at Christmastide. “O Holy Night” – written by a man who lost his faith and a man who did not have faith in the story he was retelling, had become extraordinary in guiding the world to expansive, inclusive peace. Despite its imperfections, it has become a song of perfect peace to the world!

Peace does not rely on our perfection, but on our willingness to, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Peter puts it, “make every effort to be found by God in peace.” So, make a path in the wilderness to welcome the exiles home – or be willing to step onto a path that God has placed before you, if you are in exile yourself. Then we shall all see God’s glory together, as all oppression shall cease and we sing out the good news of (im)perfect peace! Amen.