

# Story and Meditation: The Way of the Lord

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Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

by *Eric Anderson*

For reasons that she never really wanted to explain – that happens with birds and people sometimes – an ‘amakihi decided one day that she’d like to fly upside down. Not just for a few wingbeats or a glide. She wanted to fly upside down all the time.

When asked about this, she tended to say something vague about wanting to watch the sky above for the color of the sky, or to be attentive for patrolling ‘io, or to watch for bad weather. Those reasons didn’t sound convincing even to her. Whatever the reason, she set out to do it. As she was both a strong-willed and strong-winged bird – and ‘amakihi tend to be pretty strong fliers – she was far more successful at it than anyone could have imagined.

Like nearly all ‘amakihi, she started by being able to go from full flight to nearly a complete stop with just a turn of the wing. She turned that into loops and rolls, experimenting with ways to take wings that shaped the flow of air quite nicely when right-side-up to do the same when upside down. It took more wingbeats, and she tended to drop quite alarmingly as they lost their grip on the breeze. She had to get used to beating strongly up instead of down – I mean, in the opposite direction of a strong wingbeat for right-side-up flight. It was taxing. It was tiring. It looked rather odd as her altitude rose and fell. It took so much concentration that she didn’t notice whether the sky was blue or grey, let alone whether there was an ‘io in it.

Her best friend sat her down one day on a mamane branch and demanded to know why she was doing this. It took some pleading, some coaxing, and some outright promises to show her an amazing source for spiders to get the story.

“I was watching an i’iwi sipping nectar,” she said. “He was rather rude.”

Sometimes i’iwi are like that. Sometimes people are, too.

“I was admiring how he would sip nectar while hanging upside down,” she said. “He said that was nothing. It was flying upside down that was hard. Then he looked at me and said, ‘I doubt that you can do either one.’ ‘Oh, yes, I can,’ I said, even though I couldn’t. But now I’m determined to do it.”

Her friend thought about this. Then she asked, “So... You’re determined to fly in a way that you’ll never do much better than you are now – which is pretty amazing, by the way – but a

way that puts you at risk and, frankly, makes you look rather ridiculous, because an i'iwi was rude to you?"

Put that way, the first 'amakihi admitted, it didn't sound good. "But I want to be great," she insisted.

"Greatness comes when you make the most of yourself," said her friend. "You're a wonderful bird, truly. I just don't think flying upside down all the time makes the most of you. You're giving up a lot of your skill to do one thing that no bird can really do well."

The 'amakihi thought about this. "How about a loop or two everyone once in a while?" she asked. "They're fun."

Her friend grinned. "Now you're talking."

What is the way of the Lord?

For Isaiah, writing for people held in exile, people perhaps in the second or third generation of their exile – can you imagine that? I struggle with it – the way of the Lord could be imagined as a physical road. It was the road that led from Babylon in Mesopotamia to the ruins of Jerusalem, a distance of about 540 miles. The road they would actually follow, however, would go much farther. Going straight between Babylon and Jerusalem meant spending miles upon miles in deep desert, crossing hill ranges and valleys without water. The survivable route led around two sides of a triangle and more than doubled the journey.

Isaiah's summons to build a highway in the desert would have been no more implausible a dream than the people's return home at all.

Cheryl Lindsay, writing at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org), suspects we may feel in a similar way. "Today, we live in a form of exile that separates us from our normal routines, from those we love, and from the places that provide us comfort. The forced confinement and isolation of a global pandemic are not that different from the forced exile in Babylon. We have not been wrenched from our homes; we have been exiled there. So, the return we desire is not so much to a place as to a way of being. We want to reclaim our version of normal."

Five centuries later, John the Baptist took up his ministry to the descendants of those who had, despite the impossibility of their restoration, indeed returned to the homes of their grandparents. Once again the summons to prepare the way of the Lord was raised. This time, however, the way of the Lord did not lead through a desert, but to the edge of one, where John preached and baptized by and in the Jordan River. This time the people were not exiles. They lived in their own country, under foreign domination. For John, the way of the Lord was not a physical road. It was a changed direction. It was a spiritual and ethical choice. It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – and through that a renewal of the nation.

We may well recognize this, too. As Kathryn Schifferdecker writes at Working Preacher, “And there is certainly often a need for a word of judgment. To take just one example, the pandemic has not so much caused as revealed terrible inequities and injustices in American society. It has only accelerated a process that started long before this year of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Thousands of cars lined up at food banks around the country in the days leading up to Thanksgiving. More than 25 million Americans reported not having enough food to eat in the last week in this, the richest country in the world. Those who have the opportunity to work from home (including me) live in relative security while those who have to work in person risk illness to earn a paycheck, if they even still have a job.”

What is the way of the Lord?

The way of the Lord, I am convinced, is first of all the way to human freedom. The way of the Lord is unreconcilable with slavery, with occupation, with tyranny, and with oppression. The way of the Lord is also unreconcilable with greed, exploitation, and domination. It cannot be reconciled with selfishness or hubris. John, the prophet of repentance, freely declared that someone was coming who was greater than he.

As freedom, the way of the Lord is the route from Babylon to Jerusalem. As a change in direction of life, the way of the Lord is the pathway through repentance to someone new, someone good, someone blessed and blessing.

It can be done.

In the 1750s, Englishman John Newton captained slave ships in his twenties. In his thirties, he sought and obtained ordination as a Christian minister. At the age of 53, he became an ardent and effective advocate to end transportation of enslaved people. A person can change.

It can be done.

In 1931, the nation of Japan invaded Manchuria, one of a series of expansionist military actions that are part of the history of the Second World War. How many people died? One estimate is 30 million, most of them civilians. Today, the constitution of Japan rejects war as an instrument of policy. That article was imposed, to be sure, and interpretations of that constitution have changed, but it still says that the nation will not start a war. Extraordinary. A nation can change.

It can be done.

So here we are in Advent, wondering what a post-COVID world will look like, what a post-COVID church will look like, what a post-COVID me will look like. I don't know the answers to any of those questions. I just know that any of those could be better than the pre-COVID versions, especially the one called, “me.” They can be better. They can be freer. They can be more blessed. It's been done before. It can be done again.

May we fly with all our skill and strength. May we set out once more to build the way of the Lord.

Amen.