Technology has been such a boon to traveling. With our phones we can buy airline tickets, check in for the flight, call for an Uber or Lyft to take us to the airport, be notified when flights are delayed. Oh, there is so much wonder in how we travel these days! But there is also a sinister side to it all. I love traveling, and yet I am not always a patient traveler. In those times, technology is not quite so helpful. I was flying cross country recently from New York to Seattle when I discovered an amazing option on the seat in front of me. On the display screen, which offered all sorts of in-flight entertainment, was also a map. I could trace exactly where we were, how far we had flown, and the distance to our stop. I loved it! And I found myself checking it often, only to learn that we had not gone near as far as I thought we should have. Reminiscent of my children’s questions during cross-country vehicle excursions in a time long ago, I found myself asking the question. Are we there yet?

When this portion of Isaiah was written, the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, a far cry from home. Dreams of a place to call their own, even dreams of an identity, were elusive. The past was painful, a constant reminder of loss. Everything that had shaped them had been taken away. The future was blank and bleak. They could not envision possibilities of new life. And the present was no better. They were captives, strangers in a land they did not want to claim in any way, stripped of everything they had cherished. Into the darkness of their world came the word of the prophet. “Comfort, O comfort my people.”¹ The song that follows is an intertwining of the hearts of the people realizing their plight in the world and the God of all comfort reminding them that, though their journey was not complete, there was hope. They might have been taken against their will from their home, the Temple might have been destroyed, they might not be welcomed or valued in this new place, but God was still God.

Every time I read those words, I can hear the strains of Handel’s Messiah in my head. Much of the oratorio is rooted in Isaiah, the prophet who sang words of hope in a time of doom and despair. Perhaps that is why Messiah is so beloved. We need to hear it. We need its message of promise.

¹ Isaiah 40: 1 NRSV
We need to know that it is okay to be right where we are, because God is here with us now. We might not be there yet; we don’t know when we will be. But the journey itself is a gift. God is here with us, showing us the way, providing all we need, loving us, cherishing us – as we are where we are. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”² Wherever we are, God is there.

For this community of faith Advent comes at such a serendipitous moment. We are in the early stages of the journey of transition, a journey into an unknown world, one filled with doubts and questions, one of fear and uncertainty, one with hope bubbling up into our souls. Unlike with the maps that can be used to trace a plane’s path, we have nothing concrete like that. Then the words of the prophet sing to us:

A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’³

Such a beautifully apt description of this season! Such a beautifully apt description of where we are as a community of faith. I am quite intentional about the use of the term ‘community of faith’, because we are more than First Presbyterian Church of Oshkosh. We are a group of people who believe, or are struggling to believe, or are wondering, who come together because we believe that there is something greater than ourselves that unites us, that nurtures our souls, and that propels us out into the world. As a community of faith, we believe in the treasure of each and every person as a precious and loved creation of God. As a community of faith, we believe in the hope that the valleys will be lifted up and the rough places of our lives will be leveled, that we can be the people God is calling us to be.

² Isaiah 40: 11 NRSV
³ Isaiah 40: 3-5 NRSV
Yet, just as we know that the Christmas story is one shaped as much by the suspense and danger of living under an oppressive regime as it is of angels singing in the heavens, there will be potholes in the road that are jarring. There will be rough places that make us yearn for the times when we perceived life to be smooth and uneventful. We will panic thinking we are so inadequate for the task ahead of us, there is too much hurt and pain, we don’t even know where or how to begin. It is then we listen to the voices of the prophets; it is then we delve into the birth of Jesus. And we discover that the Christmas story is not the destination but is the beginning of our own journey as people who claim the name of Christ. It is a journey that crosses all time and space, all human experience. Are we there yet? No, and we will never be because we are always in process of becoming like the One who so lovingly created us. We are exactly where we need to be.

Recently I was speaking with someone here at the church about my explorations of the many rooms of this place. My word, are there a lot of nooks and crannies here! As I was venturing around the building one day, I had this moment of panic. What if I got lost? Would anyone ever find me? It seems I kept going in circles and always found a door I never knew existed! It was a bit disconcerting. But I began to see a pattern, to discover the connections from one area to another, to put the rooms in which I found myself into the larger picture of this community. Inside these rooms are stories from days gone by and a rich and wondrous history. Inside these rooms are also the dreams of what can be. Inside these rooms is the reality of this day. As I talked with this person, it dawned on me that wherever I was in my exploration I was exactly where I needed to be. We, as a community of faith, are exactly where we need to be.

There is a freedom in embracing that perspective. Yes, we know the road lies before us, but for this day, this moment, we are here now. The prophet’s words ring out with hope that God is fully present all throughout the journey – from the rough places and the valleys, through the mountaintop experiences, and on to the full realization of God with us. Knowing we are not alone makes all the difference in the world. It gives us the courage to walk through the valleys, to make our way across the rough places, to shout with joy on the mountains. We can fully be who we are where we are, because God walks this journey with us.
There is a Latin phrase, *solvitur ambulando*, which means ‘it is solved by walking’. The journey of transition, of becoming, is solved by walking, by daring to look at the past with all its wonders and shadows and saying ‘I know who you are’. It is solved by walking and opening the door ahead, not knowing where it leads but trusting that God is holding us. It is solved by walking in the joy and heartache of this present moment, resting in the comfort of God’s unfailing and active presence.

Maya Angelou was an African-American poet and activist whose broad body of artful words were borne out of pain, a pain that was both individual and collective. Yet she dared to step into the journey of life: to explore the past with its fearful grip, to revel in the intricacy of the day, to hope that humanity could find itself once more. Her poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*, was written for the inauguration of Bill Clinton in 1993, and its message is one that life – and our journey of faith – is solved by walking:

- Lift up your eyes upon  
  The day breaking for you.  
- Give birth again  
  To the dream.  
- Women, children, men,  
  Take it into the palms of your hands.  
- Mold it into the shape of your most  
  Private need. Sculpt it into  
  The image of your most public self.  
- Lift up your hearts.  
- Each new hour holds new chances  
  For new beginnings.  
- Do not be wedded forever  
  To fear, yoked eternally  
  To brutishness.  
- The horizon leans forward,  
  Offering you space to place new steps of change.  

‘Space to place new steps of change’. That is where we are right now. We are creating space for new steps.

Like the rooms in this magnificent building, we are many people, each with our own stories, our own perspectives, even our own realities, moving at different paces and on our own individual paths. I am not you, you are not me. We are not our neighbors; they are not us. Isn’t that a holy

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wonder? We are not walking this journey in single-minded lock-step. Not at all! We are the beautifully diverse quilt of God’s good creation. And yet, the hope of Advent is that the broad arc of our journey is movement toward God and all that means. The 40th chapter of Isaiah concludes with that reassurance:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
[God] does not faint or grow weary;  
[God’s] understanding is unsearchable.  
[God] gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless. ....  
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.  

Are we there yet? No, but that was never the intent of life. Treasure the journey, knowing each step along the way opens another door to God. Enjoy the sunshine on your face, notice the beautiful twinkling of freshly fallen snow. When the hurt seems too heavy, picture God with you holding your fragile heart. Look into the eyes and the souls of your companions, your family, your friends, and know that God is weaving your lives together. Be aware, acutely aware down into the depths of your being, that God is forever here.

Let us pray.

God of our journey, open our eyes to your wonders surrounding us. Speak to us through the beauty, the struggles, through all the moments of our days. Walk with us as we find our way to you. Because of the One who lights the path, we pray. Amen.

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5 Isaiah 40: 28-29, 31 NRSV