

A sermon preached Almaden Valley United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
Date: December 6, 2009
Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Baruch 5:1-9 (Luke 3:1-6)

No Velvet Highways

I love movies. Movies are these wonderful packaged messages and lessons about life and living. In some ways, movies are like modern versions of scriptural truths wrapped in stories about us. That's really what the Bible is: narratives and stories that may not be factually true but which contains a lot of truth and inspiration and sometimes consolation and with many mega doses of challenge thrown in.

One of my favorite movies is an old Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford film called "The Way We Were." It's a period piece about a romance that spans the time from a few years before World War II to the 1960s. In the movie's opening scenes we see the characters of Streisand and Redford as students in a college literature classroom and the professor is reading and really doting over an essay written by Redford's character. As the professor is reading Redford sits dreamingly looking out the window chewing on his pencil absorbing the impact of his own words being read and praised by the professor. In the essay Redford is writing about how life has been so smooth and easy for him. He has been living in a protective shelter of glory and privilege. He muses on how life has been kind of a velvet highway for him, an ivy league preppie. Streisand is sitting in the same classroom listening with rapt, if not jealous, attention. Redford's character is the iconic student of white upper middle class privilege and Streisand's character is a firebrand Jewish radical who probably grew up in the hardscrabble rough and tumble of some New York borough and whose life was anything but easy street. And in some sense what we are really seeing in this movie is a story about the cultural clashes going on within our own country and we are also seeing a story about a country that was marching forward into wealth and status in the world and who will be the main benefactor of an industrial age that will usher in the USA's powerful status around the globe. Everything seemed to be going our way and then in the midst of a cultural class between the privileged upper classes and the radical working classes along comes the attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler and World War II. The velvet highway our country was traveling on just hit a few huge potholes on our way toward wealth and power. If you remember

in your history textbooks and memories the beginning of WWII especially was not too smooth for the United States and its allies. The country was caught off guard at Pearl Harbor and the initial battle for North Africa began with horrible losses and poor battlefield management. Gen. Eisenhower's first test of Allied leadership was not pretty. But the lessons that Ike and the American forces learned in those early days of the war taught them that there are no shortcuts and that they had better learn to work more effectively with their allies or all would be lost. They did learn, of course, and the rest, as they say is history.

For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. (Baruch 5:7)

Oh how we wish and hope and pray that peace can come to our world and that God will order that "every high mountain" and every never-ending hill that comes our way in life will be made low and that we can walk on level ground without obstacles in the way of our drive for peace in this world. Our theme for today's advent candle lighting is peace. We need go no further than our Bibles or our more modern movies to know that peace never comes easy—there is always some price to pay. Our search for peace in our own personal lives and in the lives of our communities, and nation, and indeed the world will not be rewarded by sitting on the sidelines. As a wonderful movie character once said in a story about a all-black regiment in the Civil War just before their first big battle, "it's time we anted up and kicked in."

It's devastatingly sad that we human beings cannot find better ways to protect our freedoms than the travesty called war. And if history has taught us anything it's that there are no "wars to end all wars." But, if you believe in God, or if you believe that there is a force for good, for healing, and for redemption in this world then I hope you believe that someday as we all work for peace in our lives and in the lives of strangers across the seas that we peoples of the world will help our leaders finds ways other than violence to resolve the problems that plague the human race. It will help when the majority of people in the world can see the world as God surely sees it: as this fragile blue globe hanging in endless space where the true survival of this orb ultimately depends upon finding ways to end war waged with weapons against people and the environmental war waged on the very creation that sustains life. But, peace in your life, in your home, and in the world takes determined, deliberate, and decisive work. There is no velvet

highway as we work to “prepare the way of the Lord,” and let peace be the dominant force in our relations with one another. Let us prepare our hearts and minds for peace. Amen. Shalom. Salaam.

Copyright © 2009 by Rev. Kevin M. Smith. All rights reserved. The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.