

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Second Sunday of Advent – December 6, 2015 – Pilgrimage to the Manger
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 3:1-6

REFLECTION

"The future belongs to those who prepare for it today."

- Malcolm X, African American Activist (1925-1965)

"You and I come by road or rail, but economists travel on infrastructure."

- Margaret Thatcher, British Politician and Prime Minister (1925-2013)

Holy Infrastructure

When I hear the word "infrastructure" I think of transportation. This is probably due to living in Southern California most of my life. And more than that, I think of Henry Huntington, real estate and railroad mogul. The Red Car electric train system was his brain child and baby – and he built the hydro-electric power system that ran the thing. As the Book of Wikipedia will tell you:

Pacific Electric, also known as the Red Car system, was a privately owned mass transit system in Southern California consisting of electrically powered streetcars, interurban cars, and buses and was the largest electric railway system in the world in the 1920s. Organized around the city centers of Los Angeles and San Bernardino, it connected cities in Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Bernardino County and Riverside County. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Electric

In its eco-heyday in 1945, LA had more than 900 hydro-electric Pacific Electric "Red Cars" that covered more than 1,100 miles - 25 percent more mileage than New York City's subway today. Huntington built up the Pacific Electric railroad system as a way of transporting potential residents to and from his own real estate developments. And that was part of the problem – that he never built them to be a comprehensive transit system. It was only meant to be a means of transit to the hundreds of subdivisions he built on the periphery of LA -- one of the reasons LA is so spread out today. As a result, it became easier to get around by driving.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/31/pacific-electric-red-car-la-mileage-photo-video_n_2577346.html

That's a very simplified version of the history of transportation in Southern California – that leaves out all the labor disputes, competition between railroads and politics. There are conspiracy theories about how the Gas, Auto and Rubber companies put the Red Cars out of business. But it is also true that taxpayers voted down legislation that would have raised the money to repair and maintain the system – once Huntington could no longer afford the cost – due to less income over time from real estate investments. It is also true that most rail crossings were at street level and slowed other traffic a great deal. So the powerful Automobile Club of So. CA lobbied to dismantle the trains and get cars moving faster – build the freeway system, etc. etc.

So now we drive to the Huntington Gardens to find respite in nature from the insanity of the world and our own freeway system. And we are painfully rebuilding a public transit system that, in it's heyday – real or imagined – rivaled the subway system in NYC. Ironic – as is much of life.

Today's text from the Book of Luke has a quotation from the Book of Isaiah that is all about infrastructure and transportation:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

The metaphor instructs the people of Israel to level the terrain, straighten the roads, clear the rocks – and create a seamless way for G-d to arrive in their midst. Only then will G-d restore Israel to former and imagined glory. This, of course, is not really talking about flattening the Golan Heights or moving houses in order to straighten the main boulevards. But it IS talking about getting our houses and nations in order – making sure that the social infrastructure reduces suffering and removes barriers to basic rights and services – especially for those on the bottom.

As you can imagine, G-d – like any of us – does not like to travel through war zones or stay in seedy motels in deprived sections of town. G-d is just as appalled as we are that the twisted infrastructure of the National Rifle Association is stronger and more durable than the compassion and common sense of our elected legislators. Australia has posted Travel Warnings to their citizens about the dangers of dying from gunfire in the United States – calling us out on our hypocrisy. And the security detail on the Pope's visit was pitiful compared to what we would have to design should G-d come to this country today.

This coming week there are multiple vigils and events to commemorate the Sandy Hook shootings and remember all victims of gun violence. Some are listed on the back of your insert. The website lists some ways in which we can work together to mitigate gun violence in the days ahead.

And, like most biblical metaphors, this one creates a bridge between our inner and outer lives – reminding us-who-would-be-activists to also mind our own mental and spiritual health. This text leads us to think about the “soft infrastructure” of the soul – preparing our spiritual landscape so that G-d might come into our hearts with as few obstacles as possible. We may see ourselves intermittently on pilgrimage to the Holy. But the Holy is unceasingly on pilgrimage – finding its way into the hearts, minds, souls, inner terrain of humankind – right in here.

The vigils and lighting of candles this week may be one way to light our inner pathways for the Holy.

Taking time with our family and friends each day – as an alternative to engaging in commercialism – is another way to remove inner obstacles – redirect ourselves.

Taking notes and tokens of esteem to our neighbors to strengthen the village we live in – another possibility.

Other ideas for building our Holy Infrastructure?

May we find our way forward together – and meet G-d on the road...

[Tribute Video – Newtown
Hold Light LA]

Luke 3:1-6

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT * PEACE

The Peace of Wild Things By Wendell Berry

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

On the way to the Manger we can find places of Peace.
Let us seek these places together.

We light the candle of Peace as we travel through this season of Advent.

(Light two purple candles.)

infrastructure [in-fruh-struhk-cher] noun

- 1.the basic, underlying framework or features of a system or organization.
- 2.the fundamental facilities and systems serving a country, city, or area, as transportation and communication systems, power plants, and schools.
- 3.the military installations of a country.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/infrastructure>

INFRASTRUCTURE

- 1: the underlying foundation or basic framework (as of a system or organization)
- 2: the permanent installations required for military purposes
- 3: the system of public works of a country, state, or region; also : the resources (as personnel, buildings, or equipment) required for an activity

— in·fra·struc·tur·al \-,strək-chə-rəl, -,strək-shrəl\ adjective

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infrastructure>

"Hard" and "soft" infrastructure

"Hard" infrastructure refers to the large physical networks necessary for the functioning of a modern industrial nation, whereas "soft" infrastructure refers to all the institutions which are required to maintain the economy, health, and cultural and social standards of a country, such as the financial system, the education system, the health care system, the system of government, and law enforcement, as well as emergency services.

services and facilities necessary

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infrastructure#.22Hard.22_and_.22soft.22_infrastructure

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Pacific Electric Red Car In LA Covered 25 Percent More Mileage Than NYC's Subway Today

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Huffpost Los Angeles

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The Huffington Post | By Kathleen Miles

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Los Angeles used to have a public transit system that covered about 25 percent more track mileage than New York City's current subway system.

In its eco-heyday in 1945, LA had more than 900 hydro-electric Pacific Electric "Red Cars" that covered more than 1,100 miles, from Pasadena to downtown LA, Santa Monica, Long Beach, Balboa and Santa Ana. It connected LA, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino and Riverside counties. In comparison, New York City's subway today covers 842 miles.

So how did the City of Angels end up with the most pitiful transit system of any major U.S. city? You may have heard a story about General Motors buying the Red Cars and dismantling them in order to force dependency on freeways. But that's just a myth propagated in the 1988 film "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?"

The Red Car system was the brainchild of Henry Huntington, a real estate mogul who is also the namesake and creator behind So Cal's Huntington Beach, Huntington Park and the Huntington Library. Huntington built up the Pacific Electric

railroad system as a way of transporting potential residents to and from his own real estate developments. To power all those Red Cars, he went into the Sierras and build an unprecedented hydro-electric power operation.

One of the problems the Red Cars faced is that Huntington never built them to be a comprehensive transit system. It was only meant to be a means of transit to the hundreds of subdivisions he built on the periphery of LA -- one of the reasons LA is so spread out today. As a result, it became easier to get around by driving.

Other factors that doomed the Red Cars, according to LA Metro:

- Same basic business issues both pre and post WWII - huge capital costs to replace aging power substations, catenary wire and rail cars, buses become the economical alternative, rail-to-bus conversions begin in 1925.
- No public subsidies for capital or operating costs available from local, state or federal governments.
- Cultural changes - automobile reliability improves, status symbol marketing, and women & minorities enter the industrial workforce.
- Modal improvements - brand new un-crowded highways and freeways.
- Transit service operators believed that the freeway system would accommodate and speed transit buses as a high speed backbone, thereby increasing their attractiveness to passengers.
- GM perfects and markets the 45 seat transit bus; air conditioning and air suspension become options.
- Diesel is not yet considered to be a component of a new phenomenon called "smog."

Perhaps the final straw was when Californians rejected a tax in 1926 that would have repaired the Red Cars, which had become dilapidated and mocked as a "slum on wheels." The Red Cars were soon replaced with bus routes and freeways, with the last Red Car running in 1961.

As LA desperately tries to build up its subway system today, remaining Red Car tracks can still be spotted across the city, especially around Santa Monica. Ironically, just as they did in 1926, Angelenos failed to pass a half-cent transportation sales tax last year that would have expedited the city's proposed subway extension. Even though 64.72 percent of Angelenos voted for the measure, California law requires a supermajority vote of 66.66% for any tax increase.

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