If you’ve spent any amount of time around Evansville in the last twenty years or so, you have seen more than enough of your share of these. It used to be that the orange cones only blossomed in the spring. But now, the orange cones seem to be perennial. They bloom in all seasons.

No area of greater Evansville is immune. For years, the work on what is now Interstate 69 dragged on, but the good news is that you can now get to a Presbytery Meeting or a football game in Bloomington in much less time. (I suppose that time is the same for any other reason you might be headed to Bloomington, but for the life of me, I can’t think of another reason!) The Lloyd seems to be under perpetual construction, with orange cones springing up from the concrete, which is, of course, their favorite growing medium. The downtown is replete with orange cones and you never know which street will be closed and which will be opened. That must be why so many people are on their phones as they drive. They’re reporting orange cone sightings to their family and friends.

Orange cones are an annoyance and an irritation. They cause us no small measure of frustration and lost time. Orange cones can mean danger, that the road is “iffy,” that the way is obstructed and incomplete.

But orange cones hold a promise. Orange cones assure us that, one day, the potential for a new road - a better road - will come to pass. Orange cones are an unspoken promise that we must endure “temporary inconvenience for permanent improvement.”
To my knowledge, the prophet Isaiah was never in Evansville. The truth is, we’re not sure of even who the prophet Isaiah was. In fact, we believe that there was more than one person doing the work of the prophet Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters of the prophecy of Isaiah are the work of “Jerusalem Isaiah” or “First Isaiah.” When you get to chapter 40 - where we find ourselves today - we begin to read the work of “Exile Isaiah” or “Second Isaiah.” And when you get to chapters fifty-six through sixty-six, you find yourself reading “Restoration Isaiah” or “Third Isaiah.” When you consider that the work of the prophet Isaiah spanned two centuries of Israel’s history, it would be virtually impossible for one person to be responsible for the entire work.

Still, the opening of Second Isaiah uses an image we can readily understand. The passage begins with the word nachamu - “comfort.”

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. Like a mother soothing the crying child, God speaks to the people and assures them that the troubles they have endured are over. The difficulties through which they have suffered are no more, the great hope of restoration is intact and Israel will, once more, see God at work on its behalf. The exile is over.

Now, here’s where it gets tricky. Remember that ancient Hebrew had no punctuation - no commas, no periods, no quotation marks, nothing. So, we need to be open to all the various possibilities.

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.”

That’s how we would read the punctuation in the New Revised Standard Version. You could also read it:

A voice cries out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”
The work of translation and interpretation is never easy, nor is it ever absolute.

Still, here’s the image: a road construction project. In the most desolate place, in the strangest place you could ever expect to build a road, get out the graters and the excavators!

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.

You can’t hear the words without hearing Handel’s interpretation in Messiah. Handel musically interprets the valleys being lifted up, and the mountains and hills brought low. The crooked places and the rough places are given special treatment with melismas and when you get to the words “straight” and “plain” the music becomes exactly that.

But the point is that God is coming to be with the people and restore them once again. Build the road on which God will lead the people to return home and restore them once more.

But the voice of God is not finished.
A Voice says, “Cry out!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?
All people are grass, their constancy
is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.”

The Voice of God urges the prophet to “cry out” - alternate translation: “preach.” “Get back to preaching! Proclaim my word!”

But the wearied prophet/preacher is at wits end. “What am I supposed to preach? These people are like grass and they are as loyal as flowers in the field. The sun comes up, the grass dries out, the hot winds blow and the flowers wither. That’s the nature of your people.” This Isaiah is a bit of a reluctant prophet/preacher. “Home many times do I have to tell them?” is the question put to God.

And God has an answer.
“The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of God will stand forever.”

“Well, Isaiah, my friend,” God says. “The grass may wither and the flower may fade, but that has nothing to do with my word and my way for the world and its people. You say the people may be as fickle and frivolous as they may be and you may be right. But I will be faithful and I will do as I have promised, regardless of the people’s dismissing and ignoring my word.”
But God does not stop speaking.
   Get you up to a high mountain,
   O Zion, herald of good tidings;
   lift up your voice with strength,
   O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
   lift it up, do not fear;
   say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”
See, the Lord God comes with might,
   and his arm rules for him;
   his reward is with him,
   and his recompense before him.
Regardless of who hears it, irrespective of how it is received, proclaim the Word of the Lord. In your words and in your life, preach the message that God is drawing near.

And that reminds us that we all have a part to play in this road construction project that prepares the way in the deserts and wastelands of our world. God does not just invite one, or a few. God invites us all to be a part of the work project that is the Kingdom of God. God invites each of us and all of us to level the uneven and the unjust ground upon which too many still travel. God calls us to see the crooked places - and even the crooked people - for who and what they are and straighten out the warped and twisted ways they have created. God calls us to lift up the valleys and those who live in them and to bring down the mountains of pride and arrogance and abusive power that inflict pain on people and on creation itself. God is coming to the people of earth and God will turn things upside down. And we are invited to be a part of preparing the way of the Lord.

Road construction projects are never without inconvenience and frustration. Stops and starts. Moving and waiting. Progress and detours. “Temporary inconvenience.”
But the coming of the Lord brings “permanent improvement.” Advent reminds us that, one day, just like we can now get from Evansville to Bloomington in two hours, someday we will see the world as a just and righteous place, immersed in peace and well-being for all people. One day, God’s kingdom will be fully realized on earth as it is in heaven. One day, pray God it is not too far off, we will see truth, understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation fully realized for all people. One day, may it come soon, we will see “righteousness and peace kiss” and we will embrace each other as the equally created and equally loved children of God that we most surely are.
“Prepare the way of the Lord!” Get out the orange cones! We’re building a road!
A road that, unlike an INDOT creation, will be for now and evermore. Amen.