"Prepare the way of the Lord!" is the cry we hear from John the Baptist in Matthew's Gospel on this Second Sunday of Advent. The "way" is love and the terrain through which the highway passes is often hostile. This Sunday we continue our "Awed and Odd" Advent worship theme. We are in awe of the love that comes to us in Jesus. And having been awed by love, we are thus made odd, that is different, walking in a way that is obviously strange when compared to the ways of the world; walking in the way of love in the midst of a world of hate.

Each week during this season of Advent we are asking ourselves, what is it that awes us? As children we were in awe of Santa Claus. This is good thing. I am still in awe of Santa Claus. Santa has often gotten a bad rap – and some of the bad things people say about Santa are in the songs we sing about him.

You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout,
I'm telling you why: Santa Claus is coming to town.
He's making his list and checking it twice,
He's gonna find out who's naughty or nice, Santa Claus is coming to town.
He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake,
He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!

You know, a lot of kids do not hear this song as good news. One little girl was quite shocked when her big brother convinced her that this was not just about the month of December. “Oh No!” he told her, “Santa keeps track all the time and you have to be good all year long!” The little girl was in tears, and as her parents tried to comfort her she said, “I don’t want a lump of coal in my stocking!”

Do not fear. Today I bring tidings of good cheer. I have never met a child that got a lump of coal from Santa. I have met good children and I have met bad children. More accurately, I would say that every child I have met has been just the way Mister Roger’s described them: Children who are good some of the time and bad some of the time. They all got presents from Santa. I have never been able to determine that being good has much to do with it.

Not everything our parents told us about Santa is true. Santa is not so meticulous a record keeper. In fact Santa is a rather generous soul who gives more than any of us deserve. In that way, Santa is a lot like Jesus.

G. K. Chesterton confessed in a brief essay that he never outgrew his awe of Santa Claus.
"What has happened to me" says Chesterton, “has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life until he fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way. As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good--far from it. And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me. Of course, most people who talk about these things get into a state of some mental confusion by attaching tremendous importance to the name of the entity. We called him Santa Claus, because everyone called him Santa Claus; but the name of a god is a mere human label. His real name may have been Williams. It may have been the Archangel Uriel. What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dolls and crackers, now, I thank him for stars and street faces and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill." [G.K. Chesterton, quoted in John Shea's *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long*]

The difference between what people say about Santa and what Santa really does is the same as the difference between what people often say about Jesus and what Jesus really does. It is the difference between law and grace. Jesus said the God of Love has come to be with us, so turn your life toward God. Give thanks for the gift of God’s love.

Without keeping a list and checking it twice, Jesus already knows that we haven’t been good. Yet still, Jesus gives us all. “For while we were yet sinners,” says Paul, “Jesus died for us.”

As the mystic Carlo Carretto has described it: "God's coming is bound to God's promise, not our works or virtue. We have not earned the meeting with God because we have served God faithfully in our brothers & sisters, or because we have heaped up such a pile of virtue as to shine before heaven. God is thrust onward by God's own love, not attracted by our beauty. God comes at moments when we have done everything wrong, when we have done nothing... when we have sinned."

The judging prophet says: God is coming! Watch out! You better not pout! He is watching even while you sleep. So be good for goodness sake, or else you will get a coal in your stocking, or maybe something worse!
But Jesus our savior says, God is coming, God has come. Love is here! Be the child that God created you to be.

Being the recipients of such generosity inspires us to be generous with one another.

Prepare the way of the Lord! Now, there is an awe-inspiring sight. Picture yourself on a plateau overlooking a valley where the greatest public works project of all time is underway, building a great highway for God! With childlike wonder we stare at the heavy earth-moving equipment. With world-weary eyes we see a new kind of road that fills us with hope.

What does God’s highway look like? It looks like a righteous path. It looks like a reconciliation road. It looks like the peaceable kingdom, where the wolf and the lamb journey together, and there are oasis-like rest stops where the lion and the calf rest together in the shade. What does God’s highway look like? It is a road that bridges giant chasms and cuts through great barriers. It looks like a breach in the wall that once divided Berlin. It looks like an end to apartheid in South Africa.

This week we are remembering the life of Nelson Mandela, who walked out of a prison cell and led the bitterly and violently divided people of South Africa down the highway of reconciliation.

What was the awe-inspiring vision that empowered Nelson Mandela to walk a path that stood out with such contrast to the ways of the world? Certainly he had read the prophet Isaiah and been inspired by the way of Jesus. As a child he went to a Methodist school. A lifetime later, during his first year serving as president of South Africa, he addressed the leaders of the Methodist Church of South Africa at their Annual Conference on September 18, 1994:

“I cannot over-emphasize,” said Mandela, “the role that the Methodist Church has played in my own life. Your Church has a proud record of commitment to the development of Africa’s sons and daughters in more areas than one. The great institutions of learning which spread from the Reverend William Shaw’s “Chain of Mission Stations” in this region shaped the minds and characters of generations of our people as well as many of our present leaders.

Although the dark night of apartheid sought to obliterate many of these institutions, the impact of their academic and moral teachings could not be trampled on. We who passed through them will not forget the excellent standards of teaching and the spiritual values which were imparted to us....

Methodist leaders were prominent among the prophets who refused to bow to the false god of apartheid. Your ministers also visited us in prison and cared for our families. Some of you were banned. Your Presiding Bishop himself shared imprisonment with us for some years on Robben Island. This you did, not as outsiders to the cause of democracy, but as part of society and eminent prophets of the teachings of your faith. ...

One cannot over-emphasize the contribution that the religious community made particularly in ensuring that our transition achieves the desired result. The
spirit of reconciliation and the goodwill within the nation can, to a great measure, be attributed to the moral and spiritual interventions of the religious community.

Now that a major part of the journey towards democracy has been traversed, new and more difficult tasks lie ahead of us. For, political democracy will be empty and meaningless, if the misery of the majority of the people is not addressed.

The Church, like all other institutions of civil society, must help all South Africans to rise to the challenge of freedom. As South Africa moves from resistance to reconstruction and from confrontation to reconciliation, the energy that was once dedicated to breaking apartheid must be harnessed to the task of building the nation. ...

The Church, with its message of forgiveness, has a special role to play in national reconciliation. After so much suffering and injustice, the instinct for revenge is a natural one. But the transition we are going through shows that those who suffered under apartheid are prepared to bury the past. At the same time, those who enjoyed the fruits of unjust privilege must be helped to find a new spirit of sharing. Your message and example can enable that to happen. ...

South Africa now has a democratic government representative of, and accountable to, all the people. By your fearless commitment to truth and justice, the Methodist Church and other religious bodies helped realize this. But all governments, no matter how democratic, need constructive criticism and advice. I ask you to continue to play your prophetic role, always seeking to hold the nation and all its leaders to the highest standards of integrity and service.

One of the critical issues in this regard is the disparity, within society as a whole, between the lowest and the highest social echelons. To address this problem requires comprehensive measures to develop our human resources. It also demands bold action on the part of the leadership in the public sector, the private sector and organs of civil society, including religious institutions.”

The cause to which Nelson Mandela dedicated his life seems so obviously just to us now. But not so long ago the desirability, the advisability, the feasibility of an end to apartheid in South Africa was a controversial subject, hotly debated. So let us look with fresh eyes at our world today, and see with clarity the places where disparity exists, where hatred reigns, where healing must come. Let us walk the way of love in the midst of a world of hate. Let us seek to be the kind of church that Mr. Mandela seemed to think the people called Methodists could be.

O Lord, help us.