

Ferguson, Missouri, has received international attention it never wanted. The facts are well known. A white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager. Rioting broke out in the city. A grand jury declined to indict the officer. More rioting followed. Many facts are not well known. Even witnesses disagree about the chain of events they saw. But this much is clear: Many black people feel that many white people unfairly consider them aggressors. White people generally have an advantage over black people in law enforcement and in the courts. Unfair treatment stirs anger. Anger can become violent.

Everybody is prejudiced. We all draw conclusions about strangers we see on the street, in their cars, in public parks and even in church. We live in fear. We also love violence. We patronize movies that depict destruction, and we play video games that glorify bloodshed. The media know about our cravings, so violent stories usually lead the news on television, in papers, and on line. We give children toy guns. We put weapons in their hands to play games. We have created a great divide between races, and we fill it with images of harm.

When Isaiah prophesied to Israel, the people of God had become victims of violence. Enemies had brutally driven them from their homes. Fathers and sons died mercilessly in combat. Hoodlums torched homes. Israel went into exile. They had inadequate food, shelter and clothing. They wanted to go back home, to start over again, but it seemed impossible. Seemingly out of nowhere, God commanded Isaiah to speak words of consolation to these people. "Comfort, give comfort to my people.... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service is at an end." God was coming to the rescue. He had the strength of a commander and the gentleness of a farmer. Isaiah said, he "rules by his strong arm." Yet, "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs."

God will rescue people who live in fear, but God also expects something in return. Through Isaiah, God ordered the people, "In the desert [you] prepare the way of the Lord. [You m]ake straight in the wasteland a highway for our God." If the people fill in the valleys and make low the mountains, "then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." Furthermore, Isaiah said, this wasn't just going to happen to individuals here and there: Rather, "all people shall see it together."

Could the riots of Ferguson happen in Kansas City? They could happen anywhere there is racial prejudice, anywhere people like violence, anywhere we let fear rule over charity. Advent is a time in which we pray that God will come. We need God's help to see one another in love the way God sees us. Look back over last week, and ask yourself a few questions. When you saw a stranger of a different color, what were you thinking about them? Were you prejudiced without even knowing that person? How much violence did you watch at home on television, computers and games? When you got angry with someone, what did you think about doing to that person? Did you hit anyone? Was it a member of your family? If so, what might you do to someone you don't know? If we are to fill in the valleys of fear, make a highway through the desert of prejudice, and lower the mountains of violence, we have to start at home. Then all the people shall see together the glory of the Lord.