

# Pondering Punctuation

By Ian Menzies



In the NRSV, Isaiah 40: 3 reads: *A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'* I have always wondered, 'Whose voice?', but I guess that is unanswerable. I have also pondered why the voice from nowhere in particular is so insistent that the preparation has to be done in the wilderness. Doubtless there are multiple sermons addressing these issues.

Recently, however, it was pointed out to me that there was no punctuation in the original texts. Often the emphasis and meaning of something can change with different punctuation. This verse could be equally punctuated as: *A voice cries out in the wilderness: 'Prepare*

*the way of the Lord...'* Here, it is the voice that is in the wilderness (John the Baptist, anyone?) and the instruction is much wider: simply to prepare the way of the Lord, wherever you are. The sentence that then follows about making straight highways for God in the desert becomes an example of such preparation rather than an instruction for where it must occur. Such punctuation nuances can matter. A mother's call, 'It's time to eat, children' becomes quite menacing without that comma. And so I continue to ponder on wildernesses, preparations and voices. Somewhere in all this, God is speaking; it simply remains a matter of sitting with it, to hear it anew, and to pray.

## Reflection:

*The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.*

Psalm 119: 130

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