In 1910, New York City slated 300 buildings over an 11-block stretch for demolition to make way for the construction of 7th Avenue and the subway line that runs beneath it. The Times reported that the construction would “ruthlessly cut through [the neighborhood], destroying many curious residences and businesses.” Tenants and owners of those “curious residences and businesses” strongly protested the city’s decision, but, in the end, the city claimed the properties through eminent domain, and the buildings were lost.

One landowner in particular fought tooth-and-nail against the demolition. David Hess of Philadelphia owned the Voorhis Apartment building, directly in the path of the proposed construction. He flat-out refused to have his property claimed and razed by the city, trying and exhausting every legal means at his disposal to stop the demolition; but eminent domain cannot be stopped. By 1914, the Voorhis was gone.

Some years later, after Hess’ death, his heirs discovered that the city surveyor made a mistake. A small portion of the old Voorhis property was left undeveloped, and they had a legal claim to it as a part of David’s estate. When the city found out, they asked the Hess family to donate the small piece of land. After all, it was only a small triangle, about 2 feet on each side, hardly worth anything. Frank Hess, David’s executor, described it as “scarcely large enough for the erection of a slot machine.”

But the family was still angry about the seizure of the Voorhis. They refused the city’s request to donate and even went to court to claim their property. In 1922, they marked this space with a plaque reading: “Property of the Hess Estate which has never been dedicated for public purposes.” The Hess Triangle, or the “Spite Triangle,” as it’s sometimes called, stands to this day on the corner of Christopher Street and 7th Avenue as the Hess family’s judgment against the city’s overreach.

To New Yorkers, this is a story of a little guy standing up to an overbearing government, a cautionary tale about the gutting of an entire neighborhood all in service of shaving a few minutes off the trip downtown. But all arguments aside about whether it was right for the city to take this property, I can’t help but think about how this story is as much about the refusal of Hess and his heirs to accept the inevitable. They could have donated the property and been done with it; instead, they invested the time and the court fees to claim it (probably spending more than the $100 it was worth) and to leave that message on it as a lasting testament to their displeasure.

When I hear this story, I don’t hear a judgment against the City of New York, I hear a judgement against the Hess’s pettiness and greed. Of course, I don’t know the whole story, but it’s hard not to draw some conclusions when looking at that tiny, self-authored testament to their spite.

During the season of Advent, we intentionally take time to pause and to look ahead to what is coming. The 2nd Epistle of Peter calls us to watch and prepare for the coming reign of God, a reign of justice and peace. But, just as New York had to tear down some buildings to make way for 7th Avenue, there are some things that need to be demolished to make way for God’s promised reign: “The heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire,” the author writes, “and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.”

The letter offers us a reminder that, in spite of the apparent tardiness of its fulfillment, God has a claim of eminent domain over all the earth, and eminent domain cannot be stopped. Like Hess, we know what is coming regardless of whether we welcome the promise of God’s reign or fear it.

The question upon which these readings invite us to reflect is what it means for us to “prepare the way of the LORD” in our own lives. From what are we being warned to repent? What is there within our hearts and within our society that holds us back from embracing God’s reign of justice and peace? What are those things that we hold onto, both as individuals and as a people, a nation, a human race, that risk becoming spite-triangles standing forever in judgment against us?

As we look at the world around us, we can all see the many ways that our world groans in anticipation for God’s intervention. The pandemic has only served to highlight many of those problems: issues of racism and poverty, the hatred and distrust that exists between us and our neighbors, the privilege we use to insulate ourselves from the suffering of others. The pandemic has torn off our blinders and forced us to acknowledge not only that these things exist, but that they are actively harming us all, contributing both to the rate of infection and to the slow destruction of our society and world.

When I hear texts like these, my first instinct as a preacher is to rally the troops, to call people from their quietude and passivity and to get busy preparing the way of the Lord. These texts make me see all the ways we all resist or ignore God’s eminent domain, and I feel compelled to call us all to start burning down these sins of ours ahead of God’s reign, to hasten the coming day of God.

That’s the sermon I started writing this week, a sermon of which John the Baptist would have been proud: a good, old-fashioned, fire-and-brimstone call to repentance. But on further reflection, I come to realize that that is not a sermon God was calling me to preach; it is a sermon borne of my own frustration over the brokenness of the world. My anger and my sorrow over those things sometimes blinds me to the true message of the gospel, as well as the ministries that you all faithfully carry out every day. I become as stubborn and hard-headed as David Hess, and that prophetic rage becomes my own little spite-triangle, standing in judgment not against the world, or against you, but against myself. I am starting to think that wanting to preach those kinds of sermons are more about me feeling like God is calling me to greater action.

For me—and, I hope, for you as well—these texts bring good news: neither you nor I nor any of us can create God’s reign on earth, only God can do that. God has called each of us to play a part in that coming reign, to “lead lives of holiness and godliness” as we wait for its coming, but what that call means is different for each of us.

Isaiah and John the Baptist and 2nd Peter all were called to offer words of guidance and incitement and even comfort, and because they did, we have all been blessed; but we are not all called to be Isaiahs or Johns or Peters. Each of us has been uniquely invited by God to love the world around us in our own way, and when we answer those calls, the world is blessed just as much as by the soaring poetry of Isaiah or the fiery apocalyptic of Peter or the proleptic ministry of John.

This season of Advent calls us out of our complacency to watch for what is coming, to consider how to respond to God’s call and prepare for God’s kingdom most faithfully. That doesn’t necessarily mean doing more, but it might. It doesn’t necessarily being better, but it might. What work we are called to do will be different for each of us, and it will change over time. Keeping watch means to keep looking for your answer to that question of how to respond to God’s call, even if you’ve already found it. As you can see, I, too, am still trying to figure this out for myself.

If it seems daunting to think about all that needs to be done, that’s because it is. Thankfully, Brother John is here to remind us today that One more powerful than us is coming, and that One will accomplish what we cannot. If it seems like the promise is a long way off, that it may never come, Brother Peter reminds us that God is being patient with us, giving us time to get our affairs in order as we prepare for that day, and figure out how to respond to God’s invitation.

After all, my Beloveds, God is not slow in the way we think about slowness. The reign of God is not yet here, but at the same time, it has already come. Wherever God’s children lead lives of holiness and godliness, God reigns. Wherever love is stronger than hate or fear, God reigns. Wherever someone dares to offer a cup of cool water in the name of Jesus, God reigns. In the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have each already been given everything that we need to do what God has called us to.

Today we remember that the eminent domain of God cannot be stopped; that the lines have been drawn and all that stands in the way of God’s promises has been slated for demolition, and nothing we do or don’t do can stop it. But, knowing what is coming, what sort of persons will we be, is God calling us to be? How will we respond to God’s invitation? Knowing what is coming, where can we see the signs of it already beginning to appear?