

Prepare A New Highway

3 – Re-establishing Trust

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-12

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Third Sunday of Advent

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In Stephen Spielberg's movie Saving Private Ryan, starring Tom Hanks and Matt Damon, about the young World War 2 soldier who is rescued from behind German lines after the D-Day Invasion at Normandy, there is a touching scene where an old man is being helped by his family to a grave marker in the Allied battlefield cemetery many years later. It is old James Ryan, going to visit the graves of those who gave their lives for his so many years ago. Pondering all they did for him and feeling unworthy of all they gave for him, their lives for his, he turns and says to his wife, "Tell me I have led a good life." She replies, "What?" "Tell me I'm a good man." His wife replies, "You are."

In a similar sense John the Baptist in prison, now near the end of his life, ponders how he has spent it, and whether this one toward whom he has pointed is all he had said. Now pressed in by prison walls, persecution and the prospect of death, he finds himself filled with doubt and second guessing.

Not unlike many others who spend our lives for causes we felt were noble and thought worth our all, but then those moments as the years roll by of thinking to ourselves in the late night hours, "Was it really worth it? Did I do all I was called to do? Did all I could do? Did I fulfill my purpose for the brief fourscore and ten years, or however many years may be given us? Did I do the right thing? Did I accomplish what I was here for?"

With similar second thoughts, doubts, fears, wonderings, John from prison sends some of his disciples back to ask Jesus, "Are you the one? Are you really the one, or is there someone else we should be looking for? I mean look, there is still this vicious king in power, there is still this heartless empire in control, and here I sit in prison." Life seems like it has always been like this. Jesus' response is brief and interactive. "Look and listen, and go tell John about it."

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."ⁱ

The proof is in the pudding. Jesus replies. Jesus' life has been one of giving life and giving light to, as Isaiah said, "the people who walked in darkness." They have seen a great light. Jesus is that light. He is the one. Look around, listen, it is happening. Broken lives are being mended. Crippled bodies are being healed. It is happening all

around you. It is unfolding in the neighborhoods of Judea and Galilee, and Homewood, and Ensley and Vestavia, and Fairfield and Mountain Brook and Lakeshore.

Israel has spent most of its history in exile or slavery from then until now. Long a captive people, first by the Egyptians, then by the Assyrians, then by the Babylonians, then by the Greeks, then by the Romans, expelled by the Spanish, exterminated by the Germans. Israel is being liberated by the promised Messiah. A deliverance, that is working out quite differently from the political solution people expected, but working out in a more total cosmic and comprehensive manner through the ministry on earth of the promised Messiah. God had been faithful to his people, and in the gift of Jesus Christ has sent One of the angels to announce to the shepherds that night in their fields, “a Savior, born in the city of David, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Isaiah had prophesied long before of such a deliverance and such a deliverer. This longing, this hope, had energized the imaginations of a people in exile, taken away forcibly from their homes and their farmlands and their temple. This longing, this hope, had swelled up again and again through the centuries. It swells up again even now, today. “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.”

The 35th chapter of Isaiah is one of the most triumphant uplifting passages in this great prophetic book so filled with visions and hope of how God is going to bring lost and lonely people back home again. We read here of this great transformation of all life. Barren wilderness becomes fruitful gardens. Broken people become strong and virile. Barriers become new highways.

Isaiah concludes this exalted passage with the promise of a new highway called the Holy Way. A new connecting link from the place of exile and alienation to the place of healing and of wholeness. Advent is our opportunity to travel this holy way once again. Back to God and all the good God intends for us.

We in Birmingham know something about inadequate highways. 31, 280, I-65, Malfunction Junction, need I say more? It seems we never get quite the highways we need all up and running at any one time. It seems it has always been so. Forty-five years ago, as a 10 year old child I remember driving through Birmingham in July on our way from Arkansas to Florida for vacation. It was miserable. It took hours just to get through town. The air conditioning was out in the old family Pontiac Station Wagon. I remember that. There was not yet any interstate system to get through town. You drove through the city streets of Birmingham beginning way out in Bessemer, going past the steel mills, and stopping at every single red light.

“How much longer will it be Daddy?” my sister Alice asked. Dad’s standard reply always was, “Just put your head down and say Jack Robinson, and we will be there.” My sister and I took him at his word, there in the pre-child safety seat back of the wagon, we put our heads down only to raise our heads in disappointment that saying Jack Robinson did not get us there, but only to yet another red light with heavy soot from the steel mills hovering about.

On the way but not there yet. That is the story of our lives, is it not? There is always this mixture, of failure and fulfillment, of darkness and light, in the story of God's ways with us, in the story of our journey through life. There are harsh times. There are joyous times. There are times of emptiness. There are times of fullness. There are times of war. There are times of peace. It has always been so.

To really appreciate the power of this majestic 35th chapter of Isaiah you have to see it up close against its twin chapter 34, where Israel's surrounding nations, especially neighboring Edom, are singled out for destruction for Babylon's destruction of Judah in 587 B.C. This is one of the darkest, least hopeful chapters of the whole Bible.

“For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hoards; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter, And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever.”ⁱⁱ

Against such a backdrop Isaiah proclaims, in chapter 35, a day when by the power of God, the Redeemed shall return to Zion. Nature shall be transformed. “The desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.”ⁱⁱⁱ Dry desert shall become the most lush rich fruitful farmland in the whole Middle East, like that of Lebanon and Carmel and Sharon. Barren Nature will become fertile.

Weak listless bodies will be restored. “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you....’ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way.”^{iv}

Highways were places of danger in those days. Like driving through Birmingham before the Interstates! The condition of highways in Jesus' day was why the parable of the Good Samaritan was so readily understandable. One did not set out on a journey along a highway without plenty of provision and protection against the onslaught of natural elements, wild animals and lawless highway robbers.

Isaiah is telling of a day when we will travel this Holy Highway, celebrate and laugh and sing and rejoice because all that God has promised will be fulfilled. All that slows us down and trips us up, will be over and done. Sin and its casualties wrought again and again on us, will be finished. On this new highway home that God is building, no fool or lion or any ravenous beast will be found, but only the redeemed, filled with joy.

“The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”^v

That is what God promises us. That is what Jesus the Messiah brings us. Yes John, yes Virginia, Jesus is the One!

As we concluded the reading in Matthew, after hearing how because of Jesus the blind are seeing and the lame are walking and the dead are being raised, Jesus gives a pretty good dose of reality about the continuing struggle, what Reinhold would call “Christian Realism.” The reminder that there is still this mixture of light and darkness, of suffering and rejoicing. Jesus says, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.”

From Jesus’ day to this day it has been so. Violence and war, disaster and sickness, exile and return, recession and expansion – 7 lean years, 7 fat years, these have been and continue to be part of our tragic human experience. Yet, God has not left us alone. God is in the midst of all this. God has come to us in the Savior, and opened a new highway we can travel on, assured, no matter what we are called to face, that he is with us and he will carry us through. As John Calvin put it, “As he(God) opens up the way, so he paves it, and removes obstacles of every description, and is himself the leader during the whole journey.” As Frederick Buechner put it,

“Joy is home... God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy... We are above all things loved – that is the good news of the gospel”^{vi}

Are you traveling on this new Highway? Lift up your heads and lift up your hearts. Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Glory to God in the highest!
Receive! Respond! Rejoice!

ⁱ Matthew 11:4-6.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 34, selected verses.

ⁱⁱⁱ Isaiah 35:1-2.

^{iv} Isaiah 35, selected verses.

^v Isaiah 35:9-10.

^{vi} Frederick Buechner, The Longing for Home, p.128.