

Tracy Daub  
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Isaiah 40:1-11

## A ROAD RUNS THROUGH IT

Take a global pandemic causing us to have to socially distance from one another. Then add to that the arrival of winter's bitter cold and snow. And what you are left with might be a feeling of being trapped inside a snow globe. There is no way out and nowhere we can go. The list of *can'ts* is so long. We can't travel to see family for the holidays. We can't have friends over for a holiday gathering. We can't go out to dinner. We can't go to the movies. We can't go to church. As we sit inside our homes we can see a landscape that offers us few roads and instead a multitude of roadblocks impeding our way out of this terrible time of exile.

So maybe this Advent we can relate to those Jewish people we read about in the scriptures. The Isaiah passage we read today is about the Jewish people enduring their own time of exile. The conquering Babylonian army had forced many of the Jewish people to live in exile in Babylon. There in exile, far from their beloved home, all the Jewish people could see were obstacles standing in their way of freedom. Their captors wouldn't let them go. And even if they did, stretching between the Jewish people in Babylon and their homeland in Jerusalem lay a great big barren desert. This was a harsh and dry wilderness, lacking in water and filled with mountains that would have to be climbed and deep valleys that would have to be descended. Roadblocks of all kinds impeded their way home.

But then in the midst of their despair, the prophet Isaiah brings the Jewish people words of hope. There is ray of light on the horizon. Cyrus of Persia is about ready to conquer the Babylonians and when he does, he will free all the captive exiles and let them return home. Their time of exile is about to end. And so the prophet Isaiah offers poetic words describing how

God will remove all the roadblocks standing between them and their freedom. God will level mountains and lift up valleys and will build a highway in the wilderness. A road will be constructed that will lead them home.

A ray of light shines on our horizon as well. A vaccine is coming. And we look to this vaccine as *our* road out of exile. With the coming of the vaccine, we anticipate the end of our wilderness time.

But will a vaccine really free us from the wilderness? The pandemic is not the only wilderness we will experience in our lives. Wilderness times come in all forms. They are both external experiences--like a pandemic, or when going through a divorce, or after being laid off, or when given a terrible diagnosis--and wilderness times are also internal experiences when we are gripped by own darkness and destructive habits, or brought low by grief, or paralyzed by our insecurities and regret. They are both individual experiences as well as collective moments when we as a people are struggling together. Wilderness times are those occasions that are barren, hard, and life-depleting. We will hopefully and prayerfully be liberated from this pandemic, but that will not be the last wilderness occasion in our lives.

Wilderness times are indeed part of our human condition, but what we discover from the Isaiah passage today is that God has not abandoned us in the wilderness. According to Isaiah, God provides a way for us *through* the wilderness. Isaiah describes this way poetically as a *highway*. A highway is built through the wilderness to lead the people from their condition of exile and to their homeland. This metaphorical road is our way through the wilderness moments of our lives.

As Christians, we understand that way to be the way of Jesus Christ. Remember how Jesus said, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.” The way of Jesus is the road from exile to home.

It is important to remember that the Way of Jesus does not promise to bypass the wilderness hardships of life. But it does offer us a way to journey *through* life and all of its hardships.

What does this way, this road look like? We see what the way of Jesus looks like by looking at Jesus’ life and at his teachings and his actions. Compassion extended to the weak. Forgiveness given to all. Validation of those who are overlooked and despised. The call to do justice. Loving one’s enemies. Honoring God.

Some people want a religion to give them a rule book, with set instructions for how to live life. But instead of a rule book, what Jesus offers us is a *way*. A way is less precise than a rule book. But a way honors the process of the journey and honors the pilgrim making that journey. Christians are those who have decided to set our feet upon the way of Jesus. We strive to orient ourselves toward the way Jesus has taught us.

Sometimes we get sidetracked. Sometimes we get off this road and we take other roads that we think will bring us meaning or that we think will lead us out of the wilderness times. John the Baptist’s warning cry to us to “repent” is really just another way of calling us to re-orient ourselves toward walking God’s road in our lives.

The well-regarded preacher Fred Craddock, shared a prayer he offered to God each day as he rose from bed. He prayed: “I thank you, God, for a way of life that is more important than how I happen to feel about it on any given day.”

God has given us a way of life that is more important than how we may happen to feel about it on any given day. When we are hurt by the actions or words of another, we may not feel like forgiving or even want to forgive. But God has given us a way of life that is more important than how we happen to feel about it on any given day. When we are overwhelmed by our own struggles, when our schedules are busy, we may not feel like taking the time to write a letter, or join a march, or participate in a discussion about a social injustice. But God has given us a way of life that is more important than how we happen to feel about it on any given day. When our own household has justifiable needs for our limited funds, we may not feel like sharing our money to help those in need on the other side of the globe. But God has given us a way of life that is more important than how we happen to feel about it on any given day. When confronted with someone who has been unkind or who holds radically different political views than we do, we may feel unwilling try to love that person or to see any good within that person. But God has given us a way of life that is more important than how we happen to feel about it on any given day.

As Christians, our allegiance is to the way of Jesus which is more important than how we happen to feel about it on any given day. This is the road we set our feet upon. This is the way that will take us through the wilderness, out of our exile, and lead us to our true home in God.