

Sermon ✝ December 5, 2021
Luke 3:1-6
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"...A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." ~Isaiah 40:3

One of my great childhood memories is the summer our family took a trip by automobile to the West Coast. I was ten and it was a wondrous adventure. On the way out we traveled the legendary Route 66. Upon reaching California, we took the Pacific Coast Highway from San Diego to Seattle. And . . . for the return trip home, we journeyed east on U.S. 2.

As a young boy I remember marveling at how highways had been built over mountains and how treacherously close to the edge of coastal cliffs.

I am sure that I must have asked my parents a million questions . . . *"How did they get all of that cement up here? Why did they build the road here . . . why didn't they move it over here instead?" "Where do the workmen go to the bathroom?"*

There is something to be said about highways. . . for they are and have been appreciated as feats of engineering from the beginning of time. People have been drawn to highways since ancient times. That is what made Isaiah's picture of the highway for God's people so compelling.

While we don't always think of highways as an important religious symbol, we would do well to reconsider such a thought for Advent.

Highways were very important for early peoples. Much of the land where Isaiah spoke his prophecies was a trackless waste, a wilderness of barren rocks, formidable cliffs, and blowing sand. People could wander aimlessly and hopelessly out there forever.

As a matter of fact, God's people did wander what seemed like forever until, as Psalm 107 reminds us, the Lord led them *"by a straight way until they reached an inhabited town."*

In the wilderness, a highway was a sign of promise. It was a level, graded path through treacherous lands which led to safety.

It was often the king's royal road, the king's highway, to which people were drawn even if they hadn't the social status or the resources to travel on it.

Highways, then as now, were lined with the meager enterprise of those whose hope had drawn them there—the hope for life and health and well-being and peace.

And so Isaiah cried out, *"Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain."*

Nowadays . . . we know how to level those mountains and how to bulldoze those hillsides down into valleys. We know how to make those rough places a level plain. In our culture, we love to build roads . . . we believe that they are the instrument to economic prosperity and of free access to the marketplace.

But all the roads we have built have never quite achieved the justice and hope, the profound transformation that Isaiah envisioned. (43:19) *"See, I am doing a new deed,"* says the Lord. *"I will make a highway in the wilderness. And there the lame shall leap like deer. The blind, the deaf and the speechless shall dance and shout for joy."*

This is not exactly the kind of talk we heard from the civil engineers and construction workers as they toiled on the new highway in Sister Bay a few years ago. We're a long way from ever building that kind of road.

But (*and here is the point*) . . . the Lord is coming. And all the redeemed of the Lord will walk the highway to Zion. So—we wait.

People wait when they hope. Hope gives us a reason to keep on keeping on. People wait when they hope.

On our televisions, we see countless images of the refugees lined up along the highways. They are waiting . . . waiting and hoping that there will be room for them . . . room for their family . . . somewhere.

They hope for something better . . . for no more killing . . . for a decent meal . . . for a better way of life. They are willing to wait because they hope.

This is the season of waiting . . . of longing . . . for the Advent blessing of healing and release. This is the time of peering down the highway . . . of waiting for the king.

For we know that when the Savior comes, God's new creation cannot be far behind — in God's good time.

In Matthew's gospel, we read of John the Baptist in prison. He sent his disciples to ask Jesus, *"Are you the one who is to come, or should we keep waiting?"* At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus had already cast out demons and healed a number of people; but John couldn't see this for he was in prison.

And remember Jesus' reply to John's friends, *"Tell John what you hear and see. The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor have good news brought to, them . . ."*

It is not recorded what John did when he heard this news . . . but I wonder if he didn't stand at the prison window, looking down the highway—waiting.

And so it is . . . that we stand by the highway on cold December nights and we wait. People wait when they have hope. Amen.