

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: A Light in the Darkness
Sermon: Take the Long Road Home

Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

3
Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;

4
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”

5
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

6
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

7
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

8
And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

9
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,

and those the Lord has rescued will return.
 They will enter Zion with singing;
 everlasting joy will crown their heads.
 Gladness and joy will overtake them,
 and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

John 1:4-5

In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Sermon

And a highway will be there, the way of Holiness. Moving from Nebraska to Oregon, we had to learn a few things. First, we had to learn not to pump our own gas. We got yelled at when we tried our first weekend here. Of course, we are now Oregonized in how it's done - we were in Washington a while back, stopped at a gas station, and just sat there, and sat there, Where are they??? Finally a guy came out and yelled at us, YOU'RE IN WASHINGTON DUMMY! Sorry. We also had to learn about freezing fog. Who knew that fog freezes! And how downtown Oregon City's weather might be different than what we get up here at the top of the hill. Here in worship, we have people who come from Canby and Happy Valley and Portland, and Tualatin and everywhere else. You all have different weather on some days. I've seen rain on a sunny day. Snow come from blue skies. And wind that comes from four different directions at the same time. And third, we had to learn about your roads. Your roads are, to use technical jargon: wackadoodle. Not your fault, you have something called Topography, which is new to me. Here is an actual map of the town where I grew up. (MAP 1). Nice straight lines. Notice the lines. Zoom out (MAP 2) and you can see the square miles. Blocks on blocks on blocks. Same with the counties (MAP 3). Block block block block. Here are Oregon Roads. (MAP 4). Make sense of that! Our folks tried to drive here in town! How do you get to church from our house? Take Molalla to Warner Milne, Now Warner Milne will change to Warner Parrot FOR NO GOOD REASON WHATSOEVER!. Don't turn on Leland, or on Central Pointe which is so easy to do. Leland turns to Lynn, Central Point ends up in Canby close to where Leland would take you. Get on , not just South End Road, but on South South End Road. People ask, where's your church. On South South End Road. Where's that at? On the south side. Doubly south. Says so in the name. Is there a North End Road? Nope. Just plain screwy. Here's the shape of our old county, Lancaster. (MAP 5). Here's the shape of Clackamas County. (MAP 6). Are you kidding me? Marion is worse. (MAP 7) Who would draw a county like that? Again, you actually have hills and rivers to worry about. So it makes sense, just takes a while to get used to. We have a fine variety of places in Oregon to get lost. You can get lost in the mountains, in the cities, in the suburbs where there are no road signs and in the country where there is no cell signal. You can get lost on the ocean, even! How many times do you hear that the Coast Guard saved this boat or that crew. Unlike newer cities where the streets are organized with logic, our West Coast streets are designed by centuries-old native paths (or by my theory of throwing spaghetti on a wall and saying, lets make our roads look like that). On top of this, we are the worst drivers. Not just by reputation, but as documented by the Insurance industry. In a 2016 report, of the American cities with the worst drivers, Portland came in 11th, So close to top 10. You'd understand if you've seen our roads. You can get lost. In freezing fog. With no gas stations.

The people of Judah in Isaiah 35 are even worse off. The Assyrians have just decimated the 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel. Judah was just hanging on. It was a nation on the ropes. They've lost a lot. Everything that has oriented their sense of direction and purpose is gone. The days of David and Solomon are gone. Ancient history. They are overwhelmed and they're lost. The people are afraid, and the people feel far from God. I want you to hear that. The people are afraid. And the people feel far from God. Know anyone like that? In the passages of scripture right before this, the people are struggling mightily. But into their despair and confusion drops the poetry of Isaiah 35. We're reading this poetry of Isaiah 35 on the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday

of Joy. After all the careful watching and waiting, we catch a glimmer of what might be possible when God breaks into human history. As we wait for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, God retells the story of how God guided the people in every generation. Christmas is not the first time God led the people in the wilderness.

Wilderness meant something different to our ancient forbearers. There was no camping for fun, or thrill-seeking in the wilderness. For the Israelites, the wilderness was a place of danger, of testing, of utter dependence on God. There is nothing precious in the ancient wilderness. What awaits in the desert is peril. There's a beautiful Psalm that says, I Lift My Eyes to the Hills, from whence does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. It sounds like we look to the hills with salvation, like we find solace and peace there. The Psalm actually refers to the hills as a place of danger, something to be climbed. The Psalm should be read with trepidation. "I lift my eyes to the hills. (Scared sound), where does my help come from?"

But look at the vision of the wilderness in Isaiah 35! All Creation is transformed. The desert blooms, the water flows. Creation isn't just restored, it's alive. In verse 1, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice." God's restoration is so thorough that even the landscape sings and praises God. But for those of us who are lost, who fear the wilderness of the road ahead, who can't see our way from here to there, we tend to treat God like a Spiritual Triple A. We put in a call when we're lost or we've had an accident, and we expect 24 hour road side assistance. We sing "Fix me, Jesus, Fix me" and cry out "Jesus, take the wheel." The best we can hope for is a tow or a spare tire.

But the vision of Isaiah 35 is so much more. So very much more than a simple repair of a broken road. Instead, God transforms the entire structure. I love verse 8: "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." Think of what this must have sounded like for the Israelites, so far from their home, their destination the temple destroyed, and here, Isaiah is promising a highway home. A highway for God's people.

I could use a road like that. It turns out, the roads are thick with human sinfulness. If you ever doubt human depravity, try Portland at rush hour. You'll learn all kinds of new curse words. It turns out, humans are pretty awful on the road. We treat one another in ways that we never would if we weren't encased in giant metal crates. The road is competitive, and almost intentionally violent. The road is where our worst latent prejudices become potentially fatal: a 2015 study from the University of Arizona and Portland State University found that here in Portland, black pedestrians waited "32 percent longer than white pedestrians to cross and were twice as likely to see multiple cars pass before one stopped." Our implicit racial bias is so thorough-going that pedestrians of color are given less space to cross the street by potentially fatal cars! Our roads are sadly, dangerously often where we broken people work out some of our worst behaviors.

But here, in verse 8, God offers a different kind of road: "for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." Isaiah sees a peaceable road, a road so calm and nonviolent and wide we can hardly imagine. Maybe it's a bit like a block party, when the lanes are shut down to car traffic, and all threats subside, and the old ladies dance and the young children play and the music stretches into the cool summer night, without fear and where none are lost and everyone gets home. A road so safe and wise that "no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." This Holy Highway carries all. We make the road by walking.

We are not the same as the ancient people who were enslaved and in exile. But perhaps we too are feeling fear. We worry about what is ahead for our nation, for our economy, for our grandkids. I know some of you worry about what's ahead for our General Church. You too have been in some wilderness. For as lost and fearful as we may be, Isaiah promises that there is no one so lost that God cannot invite back. No place so desolate that God cannot restore. No injustice so egregious that God cannot grant recompense. God's Advent into human history in the person of Jesus Christ and into our lives means that there is a possibility for change, real change, big systemic and structural change, not just the changing of a flat tire, but the creation of a divine highway that

gets us all the way home. This we believe: God comes into the world to save God's people, For you who have a fearful heart, there is a way in the wilderness. For you who feel lost, God creates the pathway where none get lost. For you whose legs are weary from walking, God "make(s) firm the feeble knees." 4 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."

The poet turns to the people and gives them a task: Verse 4 "say to those who are 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." The poet assigns these people, who are themselves hurting, the work of proclaiming the in breaking of God who turns the world upside down. Maybe that's our task in the days ahead: to proclaim with joy. In a hurting world, we find healing. In a dark world, we find light. In a world that has many paths to trod, confusing roads to traverse, may we find the highway that leads us home back to God. And the people of God said, Amen!