

## Reflection: Advent 3 December 12, 2010

**Scripture:** Isaiah 35: 1-10, James 5: 7-10, Matthew 11: 2-11

### “The Highway of Holiness”

The “Highway of Holiness” runs through the desert wasteland of the prophet Isaiah.

*A highway shall be there, and a road, and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for others. **Whoever walks the road**, although a fool, shall not go astray.*

Ever felt like that fool? Ever said something you wish you could retrieve, or done something in a moment of anger or disappointment that you wish you could undo? Isaiah is saying that whoever walks the road – even if the person is sometimes a fool – if that person keeps on walking the road, they will not get lost, they will not go astray.

I don't know about you, but when I read that line I felt a huge wave of relief. Relief because I do foolish things often. I sometimes think I can even get both feet in my mouth at once!

But the challenge is there too, isn't it? What is this “Highway of Holiness”, and how do we get on it and stay on it?

Perhaps our scriptures this morning will shed some light on it for us. First of all Isaiah says that that highway cuts right through the desert wastelands that God's people encounter in their lives. That tells me that even in the really bad times of **our** lives, that **highway of holiness** is where we need to place our feet.

And furthermore, Isaiah says that "the wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." The very presence of God's redeemed and beloved people will be a cause for rejoicing in the midst of barrenness and desolation. If we push that image a little further, it seems that **the redemption of God's people has a ripple effect on the rest of God's creation**. We are not to see ourselves as something apart from the natural world. We are the consciousness of God in Creation, but the rest of God's handiwork is not diminished by our seeing it for the truth that it is. In fact with our eyes opened, and our ears unstopped we will be able to know what God has done and to proclaim and to celebrate God's goodness.

In the letter of James, we are counseled to be patient and long-suffering if necessary – to wait on the Lord whose coming is sure, but of which we do not know the timing. What that means in terms of our "highway of holiness" is that **patience and perseverance** are required, and that idle speculation is a waste of time. We are to "know" that the work we are doing in cooperation with God's will – that work will bear fruit – in God's good time. Waiting on the Lord. That's a hard one for some of us. We get impatient. We imagine we can figure out when and

how he is coming. We grumble against our neighbours who may not think the same as we do. James warns us about this. He says we will be “condemned” if we do this. He warns that the “judge” is at the door. This is harsh language. If we go back to Isaiah for a moment, we see that what the prophet says regarding the highway of holiness, “the unclean shall not pass over it”. So when we recognize (and Spirit will tell us!) that we have been foolish, then we need to right the wrong we have done, and get back on the road. James is telling us to **stay the course, children of God, and keep our hearts fixed on where that road is leading us.** With our hearts fixed on God, we, by the grace of God will be saved, for “whoever walks the road, although a fool, shall not go astray.”

And so, as Mary sang in the “Magnificat”, we sing praise also to God who turns everything in this world upside down. The unwed mother will be blessed by all generations. The proud will be humiliated, the weak and lowly will be raised up. The spiritually hungry will be fed good things, and those who chase riches will come up empty.

**Mary is the supreme example of obedience.** Mary hears the will of God for her life, and she accepts the deal. It wasn't easy. It wasn't without risk. She could have been stoned. That's what they did in those days to women who stepped outside the control of local authorities. That's what they still do in some parts of the world. Are you all aware that today there is a woman in a prison in Iran sentenced to death by stoning? Mary defied convention and tradition and local codes of conduct – she risked everything to bring Jesus into the world.

So Mary stepped onto the highway of holiness. She dedicated her life to serving God by being obedient to God's will. She listened, she heard, she considered, she obeyed – and she did it for the greater glory of God.

And in our reading from the gospel of Matthew, we hear John the Baptist asking, from prison where he will die, asking Jesus, “Are you the coming One, or do we look for another?”

And we hear Jesus reply by quoting to him the things that Isaiah had prophesied in our earlier reading: “The blind receive their sight and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” In this way Jesus assures John that he is the Messiah, he is Emmanuel – which means (?) God-with-us!

Remember earlier we said that the road of holiness causes the desert to bloom – that our holiness as we strive to be more like God in God's goodness has a ripple effect on all around us. Jesus knew that John knew these scriptures of Isaiah – knew them very well in fact – probably by memory. So in pointing out to John what he already knows about Jesus, he makes the connection for him (and for us). Jesus has been going around the countryside since his baptism, healing all kinds of illnesses, raising people from death, and preaching the good news of God's kingdom to the poor.

Jesus also points out that though there is no prophet greater than John on this earth, his greatness is surpassed by all who have entered the kingdom of heaven.

So I suggest to you that **any road must go somewhere.** The prophet Isaiah has named the road of holiness. James has warned us to be patient and persevering, and to stay on track. Mary has shown us clearly that obedience to Divine Will or guidance is an essential signpost keeping our feet firmly on that “Highway of Holiness”. And Jesus the Christ has invited us to keep on the path by following him; to enter the kingdom of heaven, and to participate with him and with all those saints who have gone before us in the redemption of all of Creation.

What we are called to do and be is not insignificant. Like Mary and like John the Baptist, our role in God’s story is very important. We may not see it clearly, we may hear only faintly God’s desire for us, but we can all follow Jesus, on the Highway of Holiness.

Clarence & I would like to sing you a children’s song that we think illustrates this morning’s message very clearly. It’s called: “On the Highway to Heaven”