

**“The Highway” – The Rev. Jennifer Adams
December 12, 2010 - Advent 3A**

This morning I want to look at the Isaiah passage because Isaiah is the first reading on each of the four Sundays of the season. We should give him a little sermon time. All through Advent we hear beautiful words and images and proclamations from this prophet; he offers us visions of peace and promises of paradise and prophecies of the coming of God. Two weeks ago on the first Sunday of Advent we heard of people beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks with the promise that nation will no longer raise up sword against nation and hurt and destruction will become things of the past. Last Sunday we heard of a day when the wolf will live with the lamb, the calf and the lion and the fatling all together. And today we heard of the dessert erupting into blossom, waters breaking forth in the wilderness, the blind being given sight, the deaf hearing, the lame leaping like deer, and those without voice being able to speak. These images and these themes are beautiful ones, powerful ones. Through them Isaiah speaks to us of the end of war among people. The end of divisions among creation and the grand scheme healing of humanity.

And then Isaiah says in the reading today that in the middle of all of this there will be a highway that leads further into God, further onward to Zion, the hill on which stood the city of Jerusalem but also Zion, symbolic of the city of God, the place of ultimate reconciliation and final, holy fulfillment. And Advent is about all of this –we are an “onward” sort of people this season, preparing for a new day, moving toward a new way of being with one another in this world and with God

And this highway intrigues me probably because I can’t make water burst forth out of sand, but I can help build something. I can’t bring a lion together with a baby cow and offer any assurances that good things will come of it, but I can help us move a little. And while I can’t bring wars to a crashing halt this morning, I can invite us get our show on the road and open our hearts to revelation. So, I guess I find inspiration in all of these prophetic passages, they truly do feed my sense of hope and peace, but it’s the highway image that jumps out as the more immediately tangible one – it’s the marginally “doable today” dimension of the prophet’s words. And so I want to play with it a little this particular image morning. I’d like to explore this “highway to God” idea in rather practical terms, thinking of it as something like those “adopt a highway programs.”

You’ve seen the signs along highways and even city streets announcing that sort of adoption project where lots of different groups each take a section of road and each group’s job is to care for that section, keeping it clean and safe and travelable. And so what if we thought of church that way? It would mean that Grace has adopted this section of very special road (or perhaps it’s adopted us but work with me here). . . We’ve adopted this section of road which like any highway connects to other sections too. And our piece of highway has to at least bear some resemblance to the vision in Isaiah in order for people to travel on it, through it to the City of God.

So our first bit work in this place is to acknowledge the onwardness of the people we encounter here, all moving toward God, even if the modes by which we move differ a bit. Our work is then to clean the highway on a regular basis, in the sense of “honoring it” and keeping it safe.

And notice that safety was the highest priority in the Isaiah passage. In those days the threats were literally wild beasts who lived in the desert, and the lack of food and water that was the reality out in the wilderness. To engage on a cross-country or beyond kind of journey was a dangerous thing in those days. And the challenges while different on some levels exist still. Food and water aren't a given for a whole lot of people who are traveling today. And the beasts still lurk, literally or metaphorically making it often difficult to move from one point to the next. So what if in terms of this highway we thought of safety in the sense of asylum or sanctuary or refuge. Safety from the scary sorts of things that trip us up or knock us off track or just basically cause hurt, any kind of hurt. Our work as the clean-up crew then is to eliminate the threats that exist in our world, in our community, in our church – threats to well-being, wholeness, welcome, fullness of life. Our work is to create genuine sanctuary for all people, refuge to all who travel.

Our work is also to provide food and water which God has given to this world in abundance. And so within our section of highway we need to create rest stops complete with feasts for all. Nobody goes hungry on the highway to God. Use your imagination and make connections here – Eucharist is this – a rest stop at which there is food for everyone who hungers and the waters of baptism running right alongside the feast. Feeding America is this too. Even Holy Chow. Food and water which in the words of the prophet “strengthen weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.”

Now this highway also needs to be accessible. Not in the sense of dumbing down, but in the sense of opening up for all. Lots of on-ramps perhaps. No barriers to participation. No tolls. Easy-merging. Run with this a bit. . . What good is a highway if nobody can reach it or it has so many twists and turns that people are falling off the edges all the time or even worse, what good is a highway if nobody can even find it on the map?

So what if we really thought of church like this? A way in which to travel more fully into God, our job being not only to keep ourselves moving but to care for the section of road that we've been given.

There are of course other ways to engage this highway image, other options in terms of how we imagine it playing out. Maybe we each have our very own highway and all each of us is supposed to do is clear off our very own section, keep ourselves moving and hope and pray that eventually I myself arrive, saved. Or maybe the roads themselves are now so beyond repair that all we can possibly do is ditch the whole highway idea and sit and wait for God to come to us. Or maybe there are several roads all labeled “this way to God” but only one TRUE highway which leads to the place we really want to go.

You can see the very different theologies behind how we choose to engage the words of the prophet. I'm going to stick with the adopt a highway program, at least for today and I'd invite you to try it on too. I'm going to assume, for now that there is some connection among the many

varied sections roads that lead to God and some sort of necessary mutual reliance among the various groups that have been invited to adopt a piece of the way.

And so this season, my prayer is that we may we be good caretakers, not only for the sake of our own deepening relationship with the Holy One, but for the sake of safe travels for all.

Amen.