

The Lord's Highway

December 11, 2022

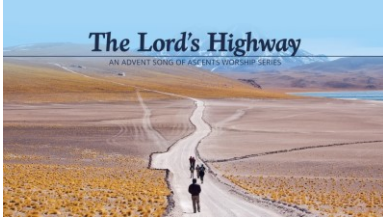
Psalm 146:5-10

⁵ *Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,*
⁶ *who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;*
⁷ *who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets*
*the prisoners free;*⁸ *the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who*
*are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.*⁹ *The LORD watches over the strangers;*
he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
¹⁰ *The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!*

Isaiah 35:1-10

¹ *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom;*
*like the crocus*² *it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory*
of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the
*glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.*³ *Strengthen the weak hands and make 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."*⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf*
*unstopped;*⁶ *then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless*
sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
⁷ *the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the*
*haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*⁸ *A*
highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Lord's Highway; the unclean shall not
travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Welcome to joy Sunday – the third Sunday of Advent! This day is marked by the lighting of the pink candle in our Methodist tradition. Today we are reminded of the news

that will and does bring joy to all people. It is the promise of Emmanuel – God with us. We stand in that promise even today. In this place or in whatever place you find yourself, God is with you. Can there be any greater joy?

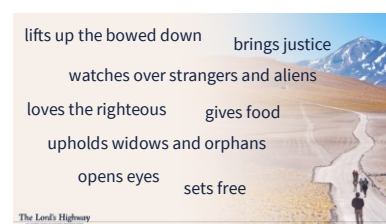
This day we are invited to travel the Lord’s highway. We are on the journey because we are not yet all that God has created us to be. We are traveling because we have not yet reached our destination as the people of God. But make no mistake – we are on our way. We are a pilgrim people, singing our songs of ascent as we come into God’s presence. Let us rejoice today. Let us claim the gift of joy today. Even though the world is full of struggles and even though many are hurting and even though many are grieving or lonely or lost – we can celebrate because the Lord our God has promised healing and wholeness. Let us pray...

How many of you like Black Friday shopping? This is not a trick question. You can be honest. How many like Black Friday shopping – whether in store or online? This is about the time that the stores and marketers want us to think there are only days left to shop. You see them – the “last minute” deals. Hurry, buy, buy, buy!

In reality, we have almost two weeks until Christmas Eve. That's really the deadline date, right? Not much shopping and gift giving happens on December 25. Unless you are an exclusively online shopper, there is time left. Yes, the clock is ticking. There are decisions to be made and gifts to be found. We are under a timeline. For many, that causes stress or worry or anxiety. In our passage from Isaiah, that is right where many of the people receiving these words were as they lived in exile, in a time of uncertainty. Yet God invites us to a deeper, more abundant way of living.

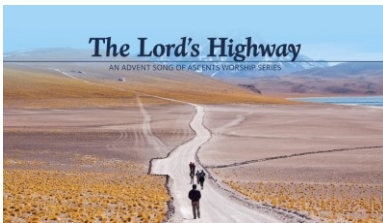
Turn with me to Psalm 145, beginning in verse 5, as we unpack these verses. These 6 verses are a cause for hope and for joy. The psalmist really encapsulates who and what the Lord is. In the opening verses we read, *"Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them."* God is our help and our hope because of God's power. God is the maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in and on them. Everything. God made everything. Our God is a big God.

Then, from the end of verse 6 through verse 9, we are reminded of the character of God through the ways that God acts in the world. First, God is faithful. Being who we are, it is important that God is faithful. Then we read a long list of the actions that God chooses to undertake. God brings justice to the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. God sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind. God lifts up those who are weighed down and loves on the righteous. God watches over the strangers and aliens among us and upholds the cause of the orphan and widow. Hear the verbs and their objects again and make a picture in your mind of our God who brings justice,



gives food, sets free, opens eyes, lifts up those who are down, loves the righteous, watches over strangers and aliens, upholds widows and orphans. What kind of a picture of God do you get from these words?

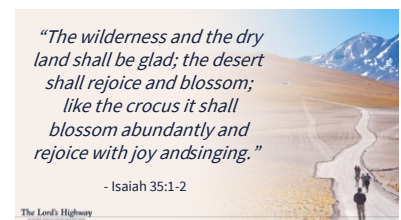
Our Psalm reading for today closes with these words: *“The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!”* This closing implies that these descriptors, that the image of God that these words create in our minds – that these words, that this image – they are forever. This is a great definition of God at God’s core. And I can’t help but think, if we are to be called children of God, then shouldn’t we also reflect and live out these characteristics of our father God?



As we turn to our passage from Isaiah 35, we hear similar words and, as we read these words, we gain a deeper understanding of God. Chapter 35 is a turning point in the

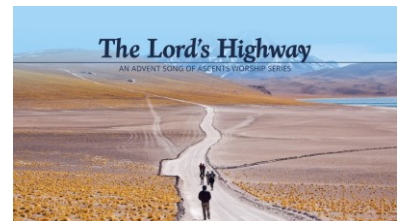
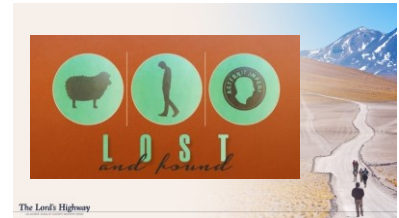
book of Isaiah. Scholars believe that there are three different “Isaiah’s” or at least three books that make up what we know as the book of Isaiah. Chapter 35 comes between what is known as First and Second Isaiah. First Isaiah, chapters 1-34, is about warning God’s people about the disaster to come and is about trying to get the people to repent and to turn back towards God. Second Isaiah is written after the disaster has come and the people are living in exile. Second Isaiah is mostly about hope and a promised return to Israel.

Chapter 35 begins with these words: *“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.”*



To those living in exile, God says, it won't always be this way. And oh, how God says it! The place that has no life will explode with life. The crocus will blossom how? Abundantly! Creation itself will erupt with joy and with singing. As we consider those living in exile, why would the desert bloom and burst forth with joy? It does so to usher the exiles home with joy and gladness.

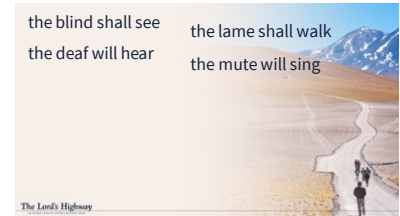
This idea is mirrored over and over in Jesus' ministry. It is mirrored best as he tells three parables in a row in Luke 15. As the coin, sheep, and son that were lost are each found, what happens? The woman, the shepherd, and the father all celebrate extravagantly. They all threw a big party to celebrate when what was lost is found. In the same way, God loves it when the people are brought back from exile – just as God loves it when someone that was lost is found. This remains true today. It was true for you and for me. God and the angels in heaven celebrated the day we declared Jesus our Lord and Savior. And the celebration continues as we walk each day in faith. Not only that, my friends, but we too rejoice as we walk on the Lord's highway in this life.



As we continue in our Isaiah 35 passage, we begin to see how the promise is worked out for humanity. The glory of the Lord will be revealed as God strengthens weak hands and makes firm the feeble knees. To those with fearful hearts, God says, *“Be strong, do not fear!... God will come and save you.”* The exiles, those enduring the seventy years, they were weak and feeble. They needed strength. The younger generation, those who were born in captivity, they did not know where they were returning to, they needed the fear of the unknown and the uncertainty to be removed.

God says to all of these – young and old – do not fear, I will walk the Lord’s highway with you. Yes, know that the Lord your God will come and save.

As we turn to verses 5-8, we see the same story of redemption and rescue heard in Psalm 146, except that it is for creation as well as for humanity. In the opening two and a half verses we read that the blind shall see and that the deaf will hear. We read that the lame shall walk, and the mute shall sing. Before we press on into the healing and wholeness that God promises to creation, let’s pause and consider how we have experienced these things. As we do, I invite you to see these in a larger view, in a way that is more than just physical. Yes, God does restore and redeem us physically. But God also works to heal our emotional and relational and spiritual brokenness. With that point of view in mind, when has God given you eyes to see or ears to hear? When has God helped you to walk or to sing when your heart was far from joy? We will turn to the answers to these questions in just a moment.

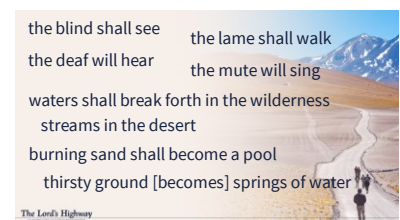


Before we do, though, look with me at the rest of verse 6 as well as verses 7 and 8.

Here God proclaims that the *“waters shall break forth in the wilderness”* and that there will be *“streams in the desert.”* God declares that

“burning sand shall become a pool” and that *“thirsty ground [become] springs of water.”* On the literal level, God is talking about turning the dry and barren into something

lush and beautiful. The crocus will burst into bloom. On a deeper level, though, Isaiah could be talking about the ways in which God will impact humanity.



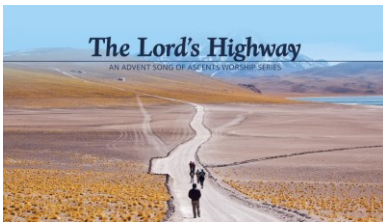
Maybe these words don't just apply to the physical world. Maybe these too speak of the human condition. In seasons in my life, my faith has felt dry. I have felt, at times, like I was wandering in the wilderness. I bet those living in captivity in Babylon experienced these things too. Have you had times in your journey of faith when you could have described your experience as being in the wilderness or in the desert? I think we all have those times periodically. Because of that, I believe that we have all experienced times when God has brought new life to our dryness or has nurtured us when we felt barren.

In the same way, we have all had times in life when we could not see the next step to take, when we could not perceive the way forward. Turning to the scriptures or to God in prayer, our eyes have been opened as God showed us the way. We have all come to places where we did not feel like we could go on, to times when we did not have the strength to take that next step. In these moments too, God has drawn near, giving us just what we needed to go on, to keep walking. God has intervened in my life in these other ways too. The Spirit has revealed wisdom or guidance to my ears that could not hear. God has brought an unspeakable joy or a peace that passes understanding in times of trial, leading my soul to sing praises to God. We have all been touched by God when we needed God's presence the most. We have all experienced what it means to be redeemed and restored by God.

Turning to verses 8 and 9, we begin to lean into the promises that come in today's passage. In verse 8 we read, *"A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Lord's Highway; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;*

no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”The Lord’s highway is safe and secure. It is for God’s children. But we will not be alone.

It is not a solitary journey. It is a journey taken in community. Our community begins in our relationship with Jesus and with the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. Our relationship is founded upon the example that Christ set when God came to dwell among humanity. Christ came and lived among us in part to show us the way to the father, to God. In Spirit, we are guided on the journey of faith. With the Spirit, we walk together. As John Wesley reported as death neared, “Best of all, God is with us.” This is true in our dying and in our living. God is with us.



Once we begin to walk this highway, we begin to be healed, to see, to learn, and to grow in our faith. We begin to understand what it means to be whole. This is where the

Christian community is so important. It is in community that we begin to share how God has healed us, how God has opened our eyes or ears. And then we become a sign to others. Living our faith in the world, we become witnesses to the power of God to restore and redeem. We are living examples of that power. We are witnesses to the power of “God with us.” We become light to those living in the darkness. We are empowered by God, able to say to those who are weak or feeble or fearful, *“Be strong, fear not”* – God is with you!

In verse 9 we read, *“No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.”* We will be protected as we walk this highway. We will be safe from all kinds of enemies.

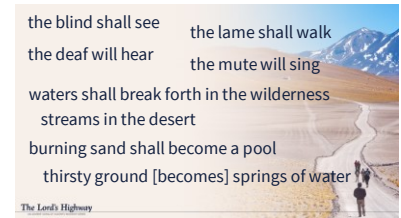
In those times when God has given us the strength to take the next step or when the Spirit has whispered the direction that we needed to go when we saw no way forward, we knew that no lion, that no earthly power, that no ravenous evil, could walk with us when we chose to walk with the Lord.

Because of our experiences, we can invite others that are struggling with what we struggled with or we can encourage those who are wrestling with what we wrestled with to trust in the Lord, to turn to God, to join us as we walk the Lord's highway. God promises to protect those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

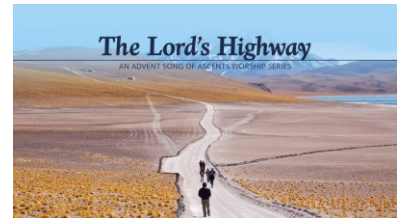
And then Isaiah brings it home in verse 10: *"And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."* There will be joy and singing as the ransomed walk the Lord's highway. Those saved by the blood of Jesus will be joyful and glad as we walk towards Zion. As we approach the new heaven and earth all sorrow and pain and heartache will fall away. No, it will flee away, the passage says. This is how we are invited to walk with the Lord.

As we close, let us be reminded once again of why we walk the Lord's highway each day, especially during the season of Advent. Especially now because this is a season when people are more open to and aware of the spirit of Christ and the spirit of this Christian holiday. So, why walk the Lord's highway? First, the personal reason. We walk this highway because we are in relationship with the Lord. As we walk with the Lord, we are blessed with his peace, hope, and joy.

Second, we walk the Lord's highway because we are called to witness to our faith. We witness to what we have experienced – the ways that the Lord has opened our eyes and ears, the ways that the Lord has spoken to us and brought us to singing, the ways that the Lord has brought water and life to our dryness and barrenness. We share the story of what Christ has done for us.



We also witness to the ways that God has brought relief and comfort and has satisfied our spiritual and emotional and relational thirst. We bear witness to the power of Christ to redeem and restore by sharing how he has done these things in our lives. We live out a public witness to what the Lord has done in our lives – why? – so that those who do not know the Lord can be drawn into the power of Christ, so that they can be invited to join us as we walk the Lord's highway. May we joyfully live out our faith this week, encouraging others to step towards a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Think through your journey of faith. When has the Lord opened your eyes or ears... or brought life in your season of dryness or...?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know this holiday season that may be more open to an invite to worship, especially on Christmas Eve? Pray for the words to speak to them.
- 3) *Study*. Read Psalm 80:17-19 as a proclamation of faith. As we lean into Christmas, how can these words lead and guide you?