

99 years ago, in 1919, the US Army attempted to drive a convoy of military trucks from Washington, DC, to San Francisco, CA. The roads at that time were pretty rough. There were a few paved stretches, but not many. It was a grueling trip. The convoy experienced 231 accidents, breakdowns and stoppages of various kinds. They also broke and had to repair 88 wooden bridges along their route. 9 trucks had to leave the convoy because of breakdowns, and 21 men had to drop out because of injuries. The convoy eventually made it. But it was a long 56-day slog to get these trucks driven across our country.

A young 28-year-old army officer was part of this convoy and observed the difficulties of the trip firsthand. In his later years, he was able to do something about it. When he became President, Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act which created our modern interstate highway system. The distance that took 56 days to drive in 1919 can now be driven in about 40 hours, or 5 eight-hour days on modern, limited access interstate highways.

Modern interstates sometimes parallel older roads. And in hilly terrain you can see a huge difference. The older roads hug the terrain, going up and down like a roller coaster. But the interstates have a more consistent grade, cutting through some of the hills, and either filling in or bridging over some of the valleys.

In our Gospel lesson today, Luke quotes the second prophet to write under the name of Isaiah. Second Isaiah uses words and images that seem to echo our interstate highways. Luke, along with Matthew and Mark, use these words of Isaiah's to describe John the Baptist, John the Baptizer. And in John's Gospel, John the Baptist himself quotes these words as a self-description:¹

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

I can easily picture John the Baptizer standing at the southern end of the Jordan River saying these words.

John is in the wilderness, in the Judean desert. Once you get away from the trees that grow along the riverbank, the southern end of the Jordan has deep desert on both sides. It also has high mountains on both sides. There John is, in the wilderness, in the desert, saying that he is the voice in the wilderness telling the people to get ready, and prepare the way of the Lord.

If you stand where John was standing, you can look west and see the hills that climb up to Jerusalem. From the Jordan up to Jerusalem is a distance of about 15 miles and a climb of about 3,500 feet.

Today, there are 2 roads that go from Jericho to Jerusalem. One is a direct route. The other is a scenic route.

¹ With the caveat that Mt, Mk, and Jn only use the first part of these words from Is 40. Only Lk gives the fuller form.

The scenic route is a twisty-turning mountain road. The terrain is incredibly rugged and barren. The hills and mountains are bare except for a thick covering of rocks just like this one. There are a few blades of grass here and there, but it's sparse—maybe one tiny clump of grass every two or three feet.

There are steep drop offs right next to the road, and there are times that, if you look out the window, you can't even see the road, only the chasm below. There are also times where it looks like your vehicle is going to drive straight off the cliff, but suddenly a hairpin curve comes up, and you avoid danger. That's the nature of the scenic route from Jericho to Jerusalem.

By contrast, there's another road from Jericho to Jerusalem. It looks very much like an American interstate highway. It is wide. It is multilane. It has big shoulders. The low spots are filled in, and the grade is fairly consistent.

The scenic road is crooked and scary. It is an up and down roller coaster ride. The modern road feels smooth and safe.

John the Baptizer, looking up into those same mountains quotes from Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth."

What John the Baptist was proclaiming is this:

The way of the Lord is not going to be like the dangerous scenic route. Instead the way of the Lord's coming will be straight and smooth.

Nearly thirteen hundred years before John the Baptizer, God led his people out of slavery in Egypt. God led his people through the desert into the promised land. The way of the Exodus was the way through the wilderness.

Some seven hundred years later, the second prophet to write under the name of Isaiah told of a different path through the desert. This time the way was the road of return from exile in Babylon. God would lead his people back home. The way would be made easy: valleys filled, mountains lowered, curves straightened out, rough places graded.

Almost 600 years after Second Isaiah,² Luke tells us, that in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, John the Baptist uses Isaiah's words again. "Prepare the way of the Lord."

This time, the way is out of a different kind of slavery. This time, the way is out of a different kind of exile. This time, the path leads away from sin and separation from God.

And this time, God will come to his people in a special way. God will not just lead his people through the wilderness. God will come among his people, God will appear among us to lead us, to dwell with us, to be Emmanuel, "God with us."

² About 570 years to be precise

John's message: God is drawing near in a special way. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

And as we will hear John tell us next week, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming."³ So prepare.

There's a wonderful duality here. Yes, it is God's highway, God's pathway. God prepares the way for us.

And yet we're also called to participate in the preparation. We're called to remove obstacles in our own lives, to smooth out ruts, to fill in the pot holes. God prepares a way for us. And we are called to participate in that preparation.

Ultimately, the good news of Advent is that we don't have to go it alone. We don't have to struggle along on dangerous, rugged, crooked paths through the mountains.

And we don't have to look for our salvation along other roads that our society throws at us. Society offers us many paths. You know the names of some of these other roadways. Hollywood Boulevard. Madison Avenue. Pennsylvania Avenue. Wall Street. There are many paths that claim to be the way to fulfillment or happiness or life.

But John the Baptizer reminds us that there is another road. It is God's road. It is the way that leads to true life.

"I am the way," Jesus says. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."⁴

You can try to do things on your own. You can try to find your way through desolate desert mountains. You can go up and down and around and round. You may even try some dead ends.

And during this season of preparation for Christmas—there is often societal pressure to take some pretty twisty desolate roads. There is pressure to have the perfect Christmas. There is pressure to run yourselves ragged up and down and round and round.

But we need to remember what we're preparing for.

We need to remember to keep the main thing the main thing. We are preparing to celebrate Jesus' first coming as a baby in a manger. We are preparing for his return.

We are committing ourselves to follow Jesus' way. (And this morning, we are committing young Birdie Reynolds to follow Jesus' way as a baptized Christian.) We believe that Jesus' way is the way that leads to true life.

Come and travel on the way of the Lord. Come and take the way that is level and smooth.

³ Lk 3:16

⁴ Jn 14:6

The glory of the Lord has been revealed in Jesus Christ. All may follow his way.

Prepare the way of the Lord.
You don't have to find your own road.
You don't have to blaze your own trail.

Let Jesus show you the way to God, for he is the way to God.

Make straight in the empty places of your life a highway for our God.

Let every heart prepare him room.