

The Highway

It's that time of year again. The time of year when everybody wants to go home. It's a time of year when millions of travelers get on the highways, across our nation and right here in this part of South Carolina, too. According to a front-page story run last month in *The State* newspaper, more accidents happen in this season than in any other on that particular stretch of highway known here in the Midlands as Malfunction Junction. You know where it is. It's the congested interchange where Interstate Twenty and Interstate Twenty-six converge. Some residents make every effort to avoid it, especially during rush hour. Without a doubt, it needs work. And there is a proposed plan to widen and redesign Malfunction Junction. But it will cost one point five *billion* dollars. And it won't be completed until sometime around the year twenty-twenty-six.

But there's another highway in this part of the world. Many of you may have experienced the joy of driving on it. Last October, when autumn color blazed in the mountains of western North Carolina, Bob and I went for a drive on one of America's

most beautiful highways: the Blue Ridge Parkway. Bob was driving that day, as usual. He's better at driving than he is at being a passenger when *I'm* driving! But we won't go there.

As he drove, I had the opportunity to consider each bend and grade of the highway. And I marveled at the incredible amount of labor that went into construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Which is several hundred miles in length. It is truly a *high* way, rising at one point to an elevation of six thousand feet above sea level, running over and around some of the highest mountains east of the Mississippi. And sometimes running *through* mountains. In a stretch of less than twenty miles, we passed through no fewer than ten tunnels, including one more than a quarter of a mile long.

Beginning in the nineteen-thirties, the work of drilling and blasting tunnels and building other sections of the highway prepared the way for people to travel in these mountains much more quickly and easily than they could previously. For it was and it remains a wilderness area.

In the biblical narrative, the people of the Exodus wander for forty years through another kind of wilderness expanse. Centuries later, their descendants, returning from exile, pass

through desert wilderness. In this arid landscape, there may not be even so much as a path to guide their steps. Certainly, there's no highway. It's barren, rocky, rough, difficult terrain.

But today, in the poetry of Isaiah, we hear a voice calling for the construction of a very different way through the desert, through the wilderness:

Make the road straight and smooth, a highway for our God. Fill in the valleys, level off the hills, smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks.

Do the road work. Prepare a highway!

A highway is needed. The people are returning to their homeland. Earlier, Nebuchadnezzar's invading armies reduced Jerusalem to rubble, conquered idolatrous Judah, and marched its people off to Babylon, into exile.

But now, through Isaiah, the Holy One speaks words of tenderness, words of comfort. The bitterness of exile is ended. God's highway *must* be prepared. For God will come to lead God's people out of exile.

Have you and I been in exile at one time or another in our lives? Have we been in exile in a place where we could not sing the Lord's songs? Were we once in an exile of being fascinated

by idols? An exile we imposed on ourselves? An exile of self-sufficiency? In exile, one feels as lonely as a stranger in a strange land.

On our way back from exile, we—like the people of Judah—have to pass through the wilderness. There's no way to get to where we long to be without passing first through wilderness.

It's an inhospitable place, the wilderness. A place that's not easy to be in. A place that's not easy to navigate or negotiate. It's a place of being tested. It's a place of struggle.

But wilderness is also the place where we first hear of the blessing of baptism. A baptism of repentance. A baptism of going under the waters and being raised up again. A baptism of dying and being reborn. A baptism of restoration. A baptism of forgiveness. Our faith journey—the way of salvation—begins with baptism. Our faith journey begins in the wilderness.

And so it's fitting that we find ourselves in the wilderness with John the Baptizer, here at the start of a new church year. Here at the beginning of Mark's Gospel. You know that the word *gospel* means "good news." And Mark introduces his Gospel as "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Unlike other gospel writers, Mark doesn't get into

genealogies or birth narratives. He cuts right to the chase. His gospel kicks off with the good news of Jesus and who Jesus is. And this great good news is first proclaimed by John.

Now, two thousand years later, John the Baptizer might sound just a bit eccentric to you and me. He might not be the preacher that your average Pastor-Parish Relations Committee would have opted for on their church profile. If John had been appointed to serve as their pastor, they probably wouldn't have thought twice about calling the district superintendent or even the bishop. I mean, really—a camel's hair preaching robe? Probably doesn't smell too good! And at fellowship meals, he won't touch a thing except *locusts* dipped in honey. Have you ever *heard* of such?

Now you probably won't see John's image on a Christmas card. And you probably won't see a figure of John on your neighbor's lawn. In all the visions of stables and shepherds and stars that capture our imaginations during these weeks leading up to Christmas, John the Baptizer is markedly missing.

But, my brothers and sisters, how perfectly appropriate it is that each year we encounter John during this season of Advent! For John is the one who announces the coming of Jesus Christ.

The herald of the good news of his advent is John. The good news *begins* with John the Baptizer, who prepares a highway through the wilderness for the coming One, and invites you and me to join in the work.

John, who links Old Testament promise to New Testament fulfillment. John, the messenger foretold by the prophets. John, whose voice cries out in the wilderness: *Get to work on the Lord's highway. Make it even and straight for the coming One.*

This is the work the Baptizer charges us with during this season of Advent: to do the highway construction. To prepare the way for the powerful One who is to come.

Along with the preaching of John, the words of Gregory the Great echo down through the centuries, asking that you and I “prepare...a road for the Lord to come into [our] hearts.” A highway for the One who incarnates the good news. The very One who will return in glory. When we prepare the way for the coming of him who was born in Bethlehem, we are preparing the way for the coming of the King of Glory.

But how do we do this work of preparation? How do we do this work of highway construction? It sounds like a tough job.

An intimidating task. We can't do it all on our own. And the wonderful thing is that we don't *have* to do it all on our own!

For we are a people who have been and are being and will be touched by God's grace. Grace that enables you and me to see how to make rough patches smooth. Grace to see how to flatten out that which is uneven and how to straighten out that which is crooked. And grace to see that striving to make our way up all the peaks and down into all the valleys of that former life can't compare to embracing the new life that awaits.

For grace is what makes possible responding in repentance. Repentance is turning. A turning in God's direction.

It's making this turn, beloved, that enables you to build. And every building material you need is provided. Everything you need to build this highway will be given. As a people who have been baptized through water and the Spirit, you are recipients of grace.

So even in the midst of the busy-ness of this holiday season, this *holy day* season; even—and perhaps especially—as you make your outward preparations, prepare this road that John is calling you to build. Build this highway through a prayer life of intimate relationship, of listening as well as speaking. Build

this highway through searching the Scriptures for God's word to the deepest part of your being. Build this highway through worshiping with your community, your family of faith—as you're doing this Sunday.

For these are the means of grace. These are channels of God's grace, the grace that enables you to build.

And then discover—to your surprise and delight—that even as you build this highway, you have become a traveler on it. You have become a traveler on this road that winds its way to the manger. You have become a traveler on this highway that belongs to the One who will lead you home.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.