

"An Offensive Highway" (11Dec16)  
Isaiah35:1-10; Matthew11:2-11

With the unexpected expectations we're encountering during Advent, the twists and turns and surprises to heighten our hope, today we find ourselves on an offensive highway.

Recall slippery or blocked roads you traversed to get here today. Or picture that Beltline with a traffic jam, lanes closed for construction and then you see flashing lights around an accident because a deer ran out. Yet even as those agitate your nerves, they aren't the offensive highways. Remarkably, that comes with Isaiah envisioning the opposite of those stretches of road, though it will take us another moment to get to why it's offensive.

Isaiah's vision of a lovely highway starts with a roadside beautification project, a barren area brought to bloom, a sunbaked desert expanse turned to a lush oasis of crocus flowers, and what had seemed drably lifeless instead filled with abundant joy. Already that scenic highway is a different picture than the monotony of some long car trip on an interstate.

Still, it's no byway in Isaiah's vision, not just for those looking for the pleasant diversion of a side trip. No, this road is for everyone. Since we're accustomed to hopping into a car to take us most anywhere, it has lost some shock, but for ancient people who traveled only by foot, it's astonishing that the blind would be able to find their way and the lame would have strength for the journey.

For a sense of that promise, I read these verses in the surgical prep room before Dorothea Torstenson's knee surgery, and you'd better believe she heard this as good news: "make firm the feeble knees, be strong, do not fear! Here is your God who will come to save you. Then the lame shall leap like a deer." Sure, Dorothea had still been able to get around, but

this sense of mobility that might enable her to get back onto a bike and to visit museums and even to stand around to chat after worship, this is exactly the promise she yearned for. She even joked about dancing like a deer in worship today to illustrate it!

That's a sense of Isaiah's envisioned highway. To go a step further, he says you don't need GPS on this trip or even how to read a map. In another of my favorite Bible verses, Isaiah proclaims "no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." There's no way to get lost, no risk of falling off this route, even fools.

In Isaiah's time that was extraordinarily good news for a people who had felt abandoned, with no way home for generations. These people had suffered first under the Assyrian Empire until 300 years later in 587 BC they were defeated, destroyed, carried away, and held captive by the Babylonians, with no way to return home, to their temple and their cultural practices and the life that they so longed to have. Dreaming of home wasn't the good ol' days but ancient history, receding ever further into the past.

Home. An extraordinarily good word. A release from what imprisons and a return to life. We might have sense of that longing for college students far away and returning for winter break and getting to be back amid familiar and comfortable places. You may long for bygone traditions of a family that has fractured and found other ways of celebrating, wishing for restoration and resuming what you miss. Or it's in the song "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams," written from the perspective of soldiers stationed overseas during World War II.

But from that bittersweet tune crooned by Bing Crosby, it's still a long way to offense, so we need to turn from Isaiah's proclamation of abundant homecoming, a celebration so joyful

that the land itself will excitedly welcome exiles home and so insistent for all that none will miss out on the journey or even need roadside assistance, from there we turn to the offense of the Gospel reading.

John the Baptist had sent messengers to ask about Jesus. Jesus replies his mission has been what Isaiah envisioned: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

But there's a distinction, as Jesus concludes: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." Isn't this extraordinarily good stuff? Who would take offense? Well, John the Baptist for starters. Last week we heard John's proclamation in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord, making paths straight for the coming Anointed One. He was setting expectations that the Christ would come with a raging fire, burning the chaff, clearing the threshing floor, chopping trees out of the way. Instead Jesus came not to consume and clear but to heal and share freeing good news, for the sick and hurting and poor and outcast. That subverted John's expectations and maybe caused offense. That wasn't the Messiah he made way for or the Kind of Lord for whom he was preparing.

Jesus then rubs in the offense with a pretty heavy backhanded compliment: "no one is greater than the John the Baptist; yet (!) the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than" John. What does that mean? Well, Jesus started his first sermon with these words: "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (5:3). So much for John's greatness; even if you are spiritually inept and lacking in any holiness or one of those fools who would tend to lose the highway, still the Kingdom is yours and (*ipso facto*) you're greater than John the Baptist.

Jesus ends that first bit of preaching in the Beatitudes reiterating: "blessed are those who are persecuted, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (5:10). An obvious fact is that if you're being persecuted it means someone's against you, trying to claim you're undeserving, and certainly not great or holy or blessed by God. So when Jesus stands on behalf of the persecuted, the poor in spirit, or (maybe slightly less apparent to our perspective) the sick and hurting, he is offending the offender. He rejects the persecutor. He upends our expectations.

As Jesus stands on your behalf, in spite of your poverty of spirit, he is causing offense to those who have been striving to enrich their spirits and were feeling proud of their piety. In bringing good news to the poor, he contradicts those who claim that wealth is a blessing from God. In curing disease and healing Dorothea and all who need health care, Jesus stands against those who write us off in our disabilities and our aging or who would claim we need to earn our own strength and wellbeing or say that our weak flesh is corrupt and cursed by God.

As we go with Jesus on this way toward home, toward the will of God, down a beautiful highway lined with celebration and accompanied by those who need the work of seeing, hearing, cleansing, freeing, life out from death and good news amid poverty, this way is bound to offend. That this is God's highway is offensive to those who don't want God to do these things, who want it to be their way on the highway. But, as Isaiah saw, God's promise is uninteruptable.

Now, we may find ourselves on both sides of that message, occasionally resistant to the bounty of blessing, and occasionally overflowing in joyful gratitude that we are the fools who won't be left lost or manage to go astray from God's extraordinary goodness.

Two closing examples for that split, that dichotomous pairing where God's highway goes right through our society: UW Chancellor Rebecca Blank was the keynote speaker at the Wis. Council of Churches annual meeting this week. Amid adverse state budgets, she talked of defending the university and advocating for the faculty, when being hired for "thinking is not always an appreciated activity." If that seems sadly laughable, she also noted that for every \$1 the public invests through taxes, the university returns \$24 to the economy of our state. It should be a no-brainer, the obvious way to go, and yet some still find education offensive.

Second example: in preparation for that meeting, I was reading a book by Chancellor Blank. She's a committed member of the UCC and describes how important her faith is as a framework amid difficult decisions. She helped write the denominational statement on economics back in the 1980's and the book I'm reading is called *Do Justice: Linking Christian Faith and Modern Economic Life*. In it she presents another of these offensive conundrums for us, with the words of Mary we're singing during this Advent season. She writes, "Those who have worked hard to achieve economic security respond very differently to the news that God feeds the hungry without charge and sends the rich away empty (Luke 1:53) than do those who are struggling with unemployment or discrimination" (17).

This is God's broad highway, inviting us all along to make the world more beautiful and filled with celebration. It's an invitation for when we need it, and also for when we're part of society's foolish resistance, which maybe means we need it even more.

"Be strong, do not fear! Your God comes with recompense. Your God comes and saves you." Be strengthened in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

In peace, in peace we pray to you  
For peace and salvation we pray to you  
For us who are gathered to worship and praise you  
Give blessing and healing for all the despairing  
Make highways that guide journeys home to find you

We thank you for roads that lead to you, for those of us who were able to gather for worship today, for snowplows and safety workers and all who help make transportation possible. We pray for Jean Einerson with a fall this morning and for those negatively affected by the snow, but also for the camouflage of snowshoe hares and ermines and the wellbeing of life needing winter.

Joined in Jesus' mission of healing and caring for all in need, we pray for vision and hearing and mobility and cleansing from shame and curing of disease and life where death overwhelms. (*especially Ben Bougie as he grieves his grandmother's death*). We pray for our university system and faculty and for wisdom in state budgeting.

As we await the fulfillment of your promises, we entrust to you all for whom we pray, with confidence in Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord **Amen**.