

We're On Our Way

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Biblical scholars suggest this text shouldn't be here in the group of chapters often called 1st Isaiah. They disagree whether the poem addresses the Babylonian exiles who were on their way back to Zion or was written even later. For me, it doesn't matter. Since it doesn't speak about anyone by name or a particular time, it transcends both. Which is why it still speaks to us today on this Third Sunday of Advent. Which is why it is the perfect text for this Sunday with its theme of Joy.

It's tempting to stay stuck in the image of a vengeful God who wreaks havoc on those who have oppressed God's beloved. Many adherents of faith have succumbed to this temptation. Underneath the religious or belief systems we hold, there are often three possible worldviews:

The first says, "The universe is against us".

In the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam we have observed how ultra conservative followers have such a worldview. They have created the belief in a vengeful God as a way to terrorize others into believing that God is very, very, disappointed in humankind but if EVERYONE repents of their evil ways and turns to their vengeful God, they will find salvation. This worldview has help create centuries of bitter hatred, power struggles, great wealth for a few and desperate poverty and subjugation for billions.

The second says, "the universe is neutral."

This has been a a mainstay of progressive thought since The Enlightenment. It says that God created, then set the universe in motion and then disappeared, something like a "Great Clockmaker in the Sky." There is no God against us or for us; we're basically on our own in the universe. As a liberal, progressive thinker, for many, many years this made sense to me. There was never a time when I wasn't a part of a church; I never rebelled against God despite the many injustices all around. I just figured it was up to us humans to solve the problems facing our world. The rituals of worship always helped comfort me and others who sometimes felt helpless in the face of so much tragedy. This form of secularism is insidious because we can't get at it. All the right words and ideas are there, but there is a foundational sense of an indifferent universe and an indifferent, distant

God out there somewhere. Too often people who hold that worldview end up not believing in anything or worse, turning to the rigidity of the first, where they are the only true believers and everyone else is the enemy. Thankfully, this didn't happen to me. I was blessed to attend a church that called a young Methodist couple as our pastors. Their ministry along with being actively involved with the United Church of Christ led me to subscribe to **the third worldview that says, "the universe is for us,**

It is this worldview, often called the Third Way, which Jesus taught, that has helped me recognize how the universe is not against us. God is not ready to pounce the minute we do something wrong, nor does God sit out there indifferent to the suffering of humankind and the earth itself. In some way we cannot fully fathom, the universe is on our side! God can be trusted. We don't need to pull all the right strings or push all the right buttons. Grace is everywhere. It's good to be here. Life is perhaps difficult, but it is still good and trustworthy at the core.

Isaiah reminds us of this. The poem just before today's text is filled with scenes of ecological destruction:

"The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,
and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch...
Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses."

Suddenly, without a break or explanation, Isaiah 35 cuts into the mood of devastation and despair with a new and joyful vision:

"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....

I recall a visit to the Anza-Borrego Desert outside San Diego in the early spring. There had been a bit of rain that week and everywhere the cacti had burst into bloom, just as Isaiah described. Later he says,

" ... A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's

people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”

This is the dream of people of faith—that the day will come when wars will cease and there will finally be peace on earth, good will to all. Most days that dream is as distant as the Land of Oz was for Dorothy, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion. Too often we have been fooled by wizards who promise to resolve all the world’s problems if only we would put them in charge. We know how that narrative plays out over time.

What stands out for me is the image of a highway called the Holy Way. Then as sometimes happens it reminded of an old television series, “Highway to Heaven,” starring Michael Langdon as an angel on probation who was sent to earth to earn his wings by helping people in need. Langdon had gotten the idea for the series when he was driving through [Beverly Hills](#) to pick up his kids on a Friday night. Here were people who seemingly had everything, money, fancy cars and big houses but they were leaning on their horns and yelling at each other. Langdon said they acted as if they really believed that [the Red Sea will part](#) and their car would move forward. He wondered why everybody was so angry. How much would change if they would just spend that same time being nice ... “It’s obvious the flow of traffic is going to go much better if everybody has his opportunity,” he said. If you drive through Kelly Square, you might remember how the chaos similar to what Langdon was talking about has been replaced by a much more orderly flow. A good thing. As I was driving here this morning I noticed the flashing lights of a police car with traffic stopped ahead. My first thought was that there had been an accident. Then, I saw the runners. Oh no, a road race! My fears were realized but instead of being anxious joy began filling me as I saw Santa running with the pack, then more and more Santa’s. Who could be anxious in the face of that sight?

It’s easy to dismiss “feel good” programs as not realistic and of course, they’re not. Still, it is helpful to imagine a different world, one like the highway Isaiah celebrates so exuberantly. We need that, especially in this time when the highway leads to Bethlehem, because sometimes it’s foggy and we can barely see ten feet ahead never mind a star in the sky. Other times the sun can be too bright; its rays blinding us to the needs all around us. There are too many people falling by the wayside, left behind. We search in vain for the next rest area because we are tired of running on empty and need a break. The break we need is from television and social media and its endless spewing of discord. It might be

time to find some old or new television series that depict a different reality just to get a glimpse of how it could be.

Isaiah was speaking to a people that had become discouraged—whether it was in a time while they were still in Babylon or whether they had returned and discovered the daunting task of rebuilding their lives and the Temple. Isaiah is also speaking to us—inviting us to discover just how far down the road we already have come. He proclaims,

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

It might be tempting to view those verses as politically incorrect but that would be a mistake. We have come so far in our understanding of those who are differently abled and there is always more to learn. My husband Bob is part of a community organization whose former director has moved to a position in Boston but who continues to offer support to the group. It was only after two meetings that Bob discovered Jack is blind. He is so skillful at communicating that Bob didn't realize at first that Jack was using his Braille computer.

A friend told me a different story she heard from another friend, Tom, who was part of a ministry to the homeless in a large city. In front of the downtown church the ministry held worship services that were often difficult to follow because of the noise from traffic. One particularly busy and noisy Friday noontime, Tom told how he noticed one homeless man waving to him and pointing to himself. It was surprising because he knew the man could neither hear nor speak and usually kept to himself.

But there he was, eager to do something. The man stepped into the middle of the circle, bowed his head in silence, and began to sign a hymn for the group. It was beautiful, like a dance. Tom recalled how in that moment their notions of 'abled' and 'disabled' were turned upside down. The rest the group had been shouting to be heard, but the noise was no problem for their friend...Those gathered saw a glimpse of God's beloved community.” Even Isaiah couldn't have imagined the glory of that moment in the midst of the noise and traffic of the city, the hands of the speechless were singing for joy!

I remember another dance, one that still makes me smile. Last summer at one of the concerts on the common there was a group of people in wheelchairs eating their lunch. When the music began, they moved to the center of the oval and began dancing in their chairs. Their joy in being able to move with the music was evident. It was also a reminder there was a time when the joyful dancers might never have left the grounds of their institution.

There are those who would like to claim the world is getting worse but I side with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King who once said, ""We ain't what we oughta be. We ain't what we want to be. We ain't what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain't what we was.""

There are many paths to God; we have chosen the one that goes through Bethlehem. We are on our way and as we journey, Isaiah reminds us to continue doing what we people of faith have always tried to do along the way. . .

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.

May it be so. . .

Isaiah 35:1-10

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. 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. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 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."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 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; 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. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 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. 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.