

Come, Let Us Go

Isaiah 2:1-5

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This is a glorious vision. Jerusalem will be a city of peace, and all the nations of the world will stream to it. It will be a welcoming and inclusive city, forming a new multi-cultural community. God will reign there, and the people of the world will bring their problems to God to be adjudicated. Kind of like a United Nations, the world's problems will be solved. War shall be no more, as the issues that arise between peoples will be settled peacefully, avoiding violence. Then the nations of the world will be able to turn all those resources previously committed to war towards a more beautiful future. Those resources can be spent on things that help people—feeding them, strengthening them, healing them, building the community. Paul Simpson Duke writes, "The world's curriculum is converted from learning war to learning the ways of God."

And after telling us about this beautiful dream, the prophet turns to us and says, "Come, let us go."

The prophet Isaiah invites us to take a road trip, to learn the ways of God.

The road is a rich symbol. Our culture abounds with references to it. Just today we've sung a snippet of the "Servant Song" with its line, "We are travelers on the road," and heard poems by Walt Whitman and Robert Frost.

The road can serve as an expression of our search for meaning, our optimism about the future, even our freedom.

The road can also, at times, represent a place of danger. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* the Hobbits yell, "Get off the road" because of the danger it exposes them to.

The road teaches us to expect the unexpected. And it changes us. For we never come back quite the same from any good trip.

This Advent, we are going to accept the prophet Isaiah's invitation. We are going to take a road trip to search the ways of God and discover something about ourselves. Join us as "Travelers on the Road."

Robert Frost's poem is fascinating. When I mentioned our Advent theme, people immediately recommended it. The poem is fascinating because it is so often misunderstood. Even Robert Frost was surprised that people misunderstood his poem.

He was not advocating taking the less traveled road. He was, instead, making fun of the stories we tell ourselves to justify the choices we make.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Sure, we reach decision points in life where a choice has to be made. Sure, there can be anxiety in such a decision, because we might spend the rest of our lives wondering “what if?”

But, who knows that another road could not have been just as interesting. If we had followed that road instead, we would later tell stories to explain how important that choice was.

Reading Frost’s poem should bring us a dose of perspective, even humility, about the paths in life we choose. Maybe Frost wants to relieve our anxiety about the choice and remind us to enjoy the trip.

In 2008, Michael and I took a road trip from Oklahoma City to Turlock, California to visit his brother. I took with me John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, which I read during my turns in the passenger seat. On the opening page of the book Steinbeck writes:

Once a journey is designed, equipped, and put in process; a new factor enters and takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedules, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip. Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it. Only then do the frustrations fall away. In this a journey is like a marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it. I feel better now, having said this, although only those who have experienced it will understand it.

That trip took us to some of the most amazing natural locations in America – the Grand Canyon, the Mojave Desert, the Pacific Ocean, Yosemite Valley, the Giant Sequoias. Such places overwhelm you, humble you, and inspire you all at once.

Truth is, a trip like that renews your love for this country. And it’s not just the grand landscapes that remind you how beautiful it is. Your love is renewed by the glorious human creations. Observing the Golden Gate Bridge through the fog on the Marin Highlands, one realizes that it is among the most beautiful things human beings have ever built. The wind farms on the Tehachapi Range in central California catch the evening light and whimsically look like a mountain covered with pinwheels. And every time I stand at the Hoover Dam I am flabbergasted by how such a thing can be built and am made dizzy just looking at it.

On that trip we met a town that became a new favourite--Williams, Arizona located about 30 miles west of Flagstaff. There, at the Pine Country Restaurant they serve the best pies I’ve ever eaten – no surer proof of the ultimate goodness of the universe have I yet discovered.

That trip did take me, as Steinbeck. It took me to places of wonder, beauty, and joy: sunset at the Grand Canyon, taking a nap beside Mirror Lake at Yosemite, eating sesame chicken in Chinatown, or simply catching up with old friends visited along the way.

But the trip took me in other ways as well. Despite Steinbeck's warning, I'm one of those people who struggle with controlling the trip. Now, I don't plan every detail and rush from place to place like some people. But I want everything to go well. I have high expectations. And often when other factors take control I get agitated, anxious, and can become a real jerk.

On that trip it happened in Barstow. Michael and I later decided Barstow itself was at fault. It's one of those ugly and depressing towns that just puts you in a bad mood.

We got lost. We were hungry. We were tired and needed a break from driving, having just crossed the desert. We had a stupid fight. I wish I could say I learned my lesson and have never done that on a trip again, but that is not true.

These journeys have a way of exposing us in ways that we do not always like. We get lost in beauty and wonder, but we might also see the sides of ourselves we don't like.

Driving home from that trip late at night, as each Oklahoma town came within site – Erick, Sayre, Elk City, Clinton, Weathford, El Reno – my sense of being in my own place was restored by the slow process of driving, each minute one step closer to home.

Yet, when you get there, your place has changed. Home is smaller, having traveled in the larger world. Yet, paradoxically, home is also bigger, as memory draws all things together and those places and times of one's journey become a part of one's self in that place called "home."

So, what does our Advent road trip have in store? Where will the ways of God lead us? What will we learn about ourselves? How will we be changed?

Pack your bags. Load up the car. Get the maps and GPS ready. Make sure you've got what you need. And let's set out. Turn the radio up and sing along. Watch the roadside shadows speed along. We are headed home for Christmas.

Come, let us go.