

**The Holy Highway**  
Isaiah 35:1-10  
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Nine years ago, the rock band Green Day had a huge hit with the song “Boulevard of Broken Dreams.” The song is a powerful expression of loneliness, doubt, and despair in a world lacking coherence and meaning.

I walk a lonely road  
The only one that I have ever known  
Don't know where it goes  
But it's home to me and I walk alone

I walk this empty street  
On the Boulevard of Broken Dreams  
Where the city sleeps  
And I'm the only one and I walk alone

My shadow's the only one that walks beside me  
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating  
Sometimes I wish someone up there will find me  
'til then I walk alone

This is a far cry from the Holy Highway of the prophet Isaiah. Yet, I believe it does express the authentic feelings of millions of people. Life isn't easy, and many are lost or broken down along the road. They need someone to drive out and find them. Someone to rescue them. They are sighing, longing for deliverance and with it great joy.

It is my firm conviction that Advent and Christmas are meaningless if we only believe they celebrate some past, historical events. I believe these seasons and our worship only have meaning and relevance for us today when they reveal something to us--when they help us to become better people, when they open us to a wider world, when they change us and change the world.

This Advent our worship has been designed around the conceit of the road. That we are all travelers on this road, helping each other along, and discovering the ways the God. The prophet Isaiah suggested this theme to us, for the liturgical texts from his proclamations have included images of roads, journeys, and signs from God to point the way.

They have also been wild, wonderful, exuberant dreams of a better world, filled with justice, peace, and joy.

Today's passage is particularly celebratory. In it, Isaiah imagines the exiles returning

home again, making a way through the desert, which will blossom. The dry and barren landscape will become verdant and hospitable, a beautiful scene for God's people to travel through. Along the way, God will bring healing to the people. From illness and disability, they will be restored to wholeness. It is a grand vision.

And it expresses a profound faith in God. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "The poet voices an active, insurgent, powerful God who comes with a great intention. God now comes . . . to right wrong, to order chaos, to heal sickness, to restore life to its rightful order."

In Advent, this is what we are waiting for: we long to be made whole. So, our worship and our study instruct us to prepare, once again, for this God to arrive. We prepare ourselves through prayer, reflection, confession, and thanksgiving. We charitably do our part to help others, as a sign of our own hopeful and faithful expectation.

Paul Simpson Duke encapsulates the problem that Isaiah's vision has for us. The problem that even the original poet was grappling with is "the problem of connecting old hopes with the need for new ones . . . [of] claiming old texts for new situations." He writes, "The promised Immanuel already came and is surely still among us—so why on earth are we singing 'O come, O come, Immanuel'?"

Because it is a beautiful dream that awaits fulfillment. Or, as Duke writes, "This vision wants an incarnation."

We have heard this in previous Advents, but it must be repeated every year. There is both a divine and a human element to this vision. We cannot stand idly by and wait for supernatural deliverance. As we learn at Christmas, God works in flesh and blood. Through an adolescent womb, a crying baby, a dirty stable. Through us. We await Christ's birth, for Christ must be born, anew, in us. God will be revealed in us. Our journey lead us inward, to discover the Christ child in ourselves, to discover the power and glory of God that radiates through us. When we become our true and best selves, then we help to make Isaiah's vision a reality.

As the world was reminded this week in the memorials to Nelson Mandela. We had the great opportunity to experience how one life can change the world. I love what President Obama said of Mandela this week, "For nothing he achieved was inevitable." Of course thousands, maybe millions of others, participated in the great achievements of Mandela, as he would be the first to claim. But if ever we needed a sign of light in the darkness, of hope in the midst of despair, of the truth of Isaiah's dreams that one day peace, justice, and joy will arrive, then surely this man's life and work are that sign for our time.

Fortunately, we don't have to measure up to Nelson Mandela. But we do long to be made whole, knowing that when we are whole we will be powerfully effective, gloriously beautiful, and ecstatically joyful.

Frederick Buechner provides us some wisdom for our journey, in his book *Longing for Home*. He writes about a road trip he was on once, driving to Pennsylvania to give a speech.

It was a beautiful day, and I wanted to make the most of the long trip by myself, wanted to be as fully *present* in it as I could without letting my mind go off on a thousand different tangents. Hard as I tried to center myself, however, it didn't work very well. My scattered thoughts kept jerking me now this way, not that way, like a dog on a leash. . . . And then suddenly I started noticing the trees.

They were in full summer foliage. They were greener than I could remember ever having seen trees before. The sun was in them. The air was stirring them. As I drove by, they waved their leafy branches at me . . . . [They were] glad to see [me]. . . . They waved their branches like flags in a parade, hailing me as I passed by as though I was some mighty spirit. . . . after a while I started waving back at them from time to time as if they too were mighty spirits and it was I who was greeting them. I believe I was not just being eccentric. I believe that for a little while I saw those trees as so real that I was myself made real by them.

He writes that on that drive he felt fully present in the moment, and fully present to the world around him. He felt whole and holy. This road trip reminded him that to become whole, we must learn to experience the holiness around us. He wrote,

It is our business, as we journey, to keep our hearts open to the bright-winged presence of the Holy Ghost within us and the Kingdom of God among us until little by little compassionate love begins to change from a moral exercise . . . into a joyous, spontaneous, self-forgetting response to the most real aspect of all reality, which is that the world is holy because God made it and so is every one of us as well. To live as though that reality does not exist is to be a stranger in a world of strangers. To live out of and toward that reality is little by little to become whole.

And when we learn how to do this, then we arrive home, where we belong. And that place is joy itself. Buechner concludes:

Joy is home. . . . God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy, because whatever else it means to say that God created us in [God's] image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in [God], even when we feel spiritually bankrupt and deserted by [God], [God's] mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood.

This Advent may our Boulevard of Broken Dreams be transformed into the Holy Highway of our God. We shall be whole. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Joy and gladness will be ours. For we are coming home again.