

Road Signs
Isaiah 11:1-10
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“Isaiah’s declaration stands in direct contrast to the terror and brutality that pervade our world.” So wrote, pastor Stacey Simpson Duke. Let’s take a moment to realize that. Predators co-existing peacefully with their prey. An innocent child in charge of the wild menagerie. A righteous and faithful king who rules with justice for the poor and the meek. Who seeks wisdom and understanding from the spirit of God.

This isn’t what we experience in something called “the real world.” Here, even our best rulers have significant failings and shortcomings. It is too dangerous to let our children roam around like we did growing up. Creation is a survival of the fittest, “red in tooth and claw.” The poor are routinely denied justice. And who even notices the meek. Wisdom and understanding have been sacrificed to ideological purity. And violence and pain surround us—domestic abuse, child abuse, rape, sex trafficking, bullying—just to name a few of the evils we encounter.

Yet, Isaiah is not ignorant of the real world. Notice the metaphor he uses—a branch growing from a stump. Stacey Simpson Duke writes, “Out of something that appears finished, lifeless, left behind, comes the sign of new life—a green sprig. This is how hope gets its start—it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place.” She then asks, “Where are the stumps in our lives?”

For Isaiah’s vision is not merely a hope for the ancient people of Israel. It is a word to us today, that in our lives, in our own time and place, when everything appears worn out and finished, something new can be born. This tiny spring of green leaves is a sign of God’s work. To mix metaphors with our own Advent theme this season, it is a road sign, pointing us along the pathways of God.

But, as Paul Simpson Duke, Stacey’s husband writes in his commentary on this passage, “Such visions are not easy to trust.”

Did you see the article in Monday’s paper, or maybe through some other news outlet, about the lack of trust we Americans have in each other? In its opening line, the story simply stated, “Americans don’t trust each other anymore.” Only 1/3 of Americans feel that most people can be trusted, down from forty years ago when half of us trusted most people. According to the story, 2/3 of Americans say “you can’t be too careful” when dealing with others.

Social scientists were alarmed by these results. They paper stated, “Distrust . . . seems to encourage corruption. At the least, it diverts energy to counting change, drawing up 100-page legal contracts, and building gated communities.” What a healthy society really needs is social trust. The story said that social trust “brings good things. A society where it’s easier to compromise or make a deal. Where people are willing to work with those who are different

from them for the common good.” Trust also seems to promote economic growth.

Given these findings, the statement that Isaiah’s vision is hard to trust is quite an understatement.

So, what are we to do?

I think that the only option for the church, for all people of faith, is to be counter-cultural. We have to start trusting—trusting ourselves, trusting each other, building networks and communities of trust, and then ultimately taking some risks in trusting outsiders and strangers. But it begins, I think, by opening our eyes to see the signs from God. The signs that give us direction, the signs that give us hope, the signs that we can trust.

Where do we look for the road signs?

Over Thanksgiving weekend I finished reading Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Having never read it before, I didn’t think I could preach a sermon series entitled “Travelers on the Road” without having read it. This novel has been influential and inspiring to millions and is considered by many to help define an entire generation that came of age in the 1950’s.

Maybe I’m too young. I just didn’t get it. The book has some really beautiful portions, but, overall, it didn’t do much for me. That personal appraisal is in no way an attempt to criticize anyone who has found the novel compelling, for obviously, many people have.

The novel is filled with semi-autobiographical stories of wild excess—sex, drugs, drinking, fast driving, hitch-hiking, rule-breaking, refusing responsibility. All while crisscrossing the United States and Mexico on the open road. Many see in it a search for meaning.

Critic Meghan O’Rourke published an article entitled “The American Sacrament that is *On the Road*.” She wrote,

This isn't just a jolly quest for "kicks" and beautiful girls and good times to be had at cheap prices. It's a book about death and the search for something meaningful to hold on to—the famous search for "IT," a truth larger than the self, which, of course, is never found.

Carolyn Cassady, who was the model for one of the characters in the novel, said,

So what they were really trying to do, both of them, in their living and reading about things, was to find out, Why are we all here? What is life all about? They were looking for "it." There were an awful lot of people concerned about that. That was their big quest, all of ours, really.

Kerouac himself confirmed that the novel is a quest for something significant. Unlike Meghan O’Rourke, however, he thought that they did find what they went looking for. Kerouac said, “It was really a story about two Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him.” This is a fascinating appraisal. This wild, rebellious story is about the search for God? In what way is God discovered in this story?

Maybe Carolyn Cassady can help. She said, “Jack was unusual in that great celebration of all kinds of life. Whether it was rivers or mountains and Indian names or hobos. He was so

unjudgmental and so thrilled by everything that was alive.”

Did Kerouac discover God, then, in all those things and people he encountered on the road? Did he come to understand that all those things were signs for the great “It” he was searching for?

If so, then there is a sacramental grace to be discovered in this story. A grace that corresponds with things we learn in the biblical story. Where we don’t expect it, when we don’t understand what’s happening, when meaning seems lost, and hope is absent, a small sign of God’s work appears. When the widow of Zarephath goes to get the last grain and the last oil to make that last meal before she and her son starve to death, there is suddenly enough. When Hagar, lost in the wilderness, thirsty and near death, hides her child Ishmael so that she won’t see him die, a spring of water appears. When the prophet goes in search of a new king, everyone is surprised that he selects the youngest son, whom no one had really paid all that much attention to before.

If in the midst of all the wildness of his journeys, Jack Kerouac saw the signs of God. Then surely we can see the road signs in our lives.

As the church staff conceived this series, Stephen proposed the question, “How has your road been this year?” Has it been a place of discovery and enjoyable adventure? Or has it been a place of exposure to danger, of toil and burden, of wandering lost, uncertain and unafraid?

Too many in this congregation have experienced the latter. Even as the economy seems to be growing again, we have members who are being laid off or who are still searching for quality employment years into the recession. On All Saints Sunday, we remembered our members who had died in the past year, and it was twice as many as what we usually have. Others of us have faced divorce, depression, lawsuits, trouble in our families or our marriages. And it seems that we are battling the demon of cancer. I use that word metaphorically, but sometimes this year it has felt like a malevolent force is attacking this congregational family. Way too many of you, it seems, are fighting cancer right now.

Yet, even on that dangerous, exposed road, the prophet informs us, there will be road signs. When the situation appears desperate, when the stump looks dead, just wait for the sign. Somewhere a new branch will arise, spreading its leaves. It is a sign. We can hope, we can trust. God is good, and God is able. God is with you and at work to guide you. And God will bring you home again.