

**3 Advent A    December 15, 2019**  
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**Life is a Highway**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

In 1992 Canadian singer and songwriter Tom Cochrane visited West Africa to work with the Christian based poverty relief organization World Vision. He later described that trip as disheartening, and he became overwhelmed by the extreme poverty he witnessed. When he returned from the trip, Tom found he had trouble getting over the terrible conditions he saw people living in. As a way to work through his feelings, began writing a song, but his first attempt did little to lift his hopelessness. He then realized dwelling only on the poverty would not help him or anyone else; he realized if he was going to be in a state of mind to continue the work of helping people, he need an uplift of his spirit. The result of this realization was the creation of a song that begins: "Life is like a road that you travel on, where there's one day here and the next day gone, sometimes you bend, sometimes you stand, sometimes you turn your back to the wind,"

The song *Life is a Highway* went on to be a chart topper in the United States as well as Canada and to this day when I hear it on the radio while I am driving, I can't help but turn up the volume a little louder. Because it is a song about life and the joy of living, even through difficult times along the highway of life.

It's a message not too different from the one the prophet Isaiah wrote in our first lesson where he also compared life or at least a certain way of living to a highway. This reading has always had a special meaning for me because one line from this reading: "A highway shall be there" was the motto of my alma mater, Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin. Northland is a private college and was one of the very first Environmental/Liberal Arts colleges in the country. Many students thought it odd that a college with a focus on environmental education and conservation would have a motto that stated a highway shall be there. But of course, it was not to be taken literally. Northland's founders understood the prophet Isaiah wasn't talking about a paved surface winding through a pristine forest. The highway Isaiah was describing was a way of life that would help its followers navigate the ups and downs and twists and turns of the world. It is a way of life where God is present, which makes it the Holy Way. We recognize the road or highway as God's Holy Way when we see evidence of healing, restoration of what is broken, renewal of what is spent. It was imagery Isaiah used to both acknowledge the injustices and difficulties of life and the promise that God would one day arrive to reclaim that which God created and such redemption would be both an act of love and judgement. It was a message of hope and joy to a people who needed to hear it, which is one reason why it was Northland's motto: our world view is one of hope for a suffering world, that is, the highway we traverse no matter where we go.

In our Gospel today, it also seems to be the message Jesus is fulfilling through his ministry, where he wasn't just traveling that highway mentioned in Isaiah, he actually is the Way, he is God with Us. Today's Gospel comes from a part of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus was deep in his ministry and John the Baptist was near the end of his. John the Baptist had been arrested and imprisoned for his public criticism of Herod and most likely knew he would not emerge from that prison alive. He must have had visitors, though, because he sent them to ask Jesus if Jesus really was the Messiah. We are not sure why he did this. Maybe John the Baptist heard what Jesus was doing and was concerned that Jesus' actions didn't look like the fiery wrath of judgement he had predicted. Or maybe he felt isolated, lonely, and wanted some assurance that his life and ministry was not wasted. We don't know for certain the motivation of John's question, only that it was asked, and that Jesus responded by describing what he was doing, and his description sounds a great deal like what we heard in our first lesson from Isaiah. That restoration of God's creation was beginning, bit by bit, not in one big bang, but slowly, winding through the countryside like a path or road, a highway.

It may be interesting to note in our reading from Isaiah this morning, no mention is made of the messiah. Instead it is about God simply being with people along the way. And that was what Jesus' ministry embodied, God with us along the way.

So many of the expectations of the messiah, be they of a military leader who would wage a war against government oppression, or a religious leader that would clean out the hierarchy of the temple, are about a messiah who will somehow fix a system humanity created, fix the wrongs and make the system more like it is supposed to be.

Sometimes in our modern era we can be just as guilty of assuming God will step in and fix our human systems so they look like what we think they should, which usually means those systems will benefit us and whomever we believe should benefit. Instead the promise of Isaiah is that God will restore the broken relationship between God and what God created not as an act of vengeance or hate, but as an act of love. Sometimes I wonder if it can be so hard to believe that God actually loves what God made, that means you and me, so much, that God really is willing to come and be with us that we have a hard time imaging anything other than God's presence looking like punishment instead of redemption. And that belief can be what makes us tend to hang on to those expectations of an angry God, because anger can be easier to imagine than love or redemption. Which may be a deeper understanding of John the Baptist's question to Jesus. And may be why Jesus answered it the way he did. His answer shows even us today that God isn't wanting to smite us, God wants to be with us, so much so God became Incarnate through Jesus. And Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the beginning of the healing and redemption Isaiah promised. Which also brings

about a big change for the world, one that means prophets won't be needed or at the very least that their role will change.

That is where the last part of today's Gospel comes in, where Jesus spoke about the importance of John the Baptist's ministry as the announcement of Jesus' arrival. John was the last of the prophets that warned of God's coming, and there will never be a need for such a voice again. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, prophets now assume the role of helping us see where and how God is with us, where God's judgment is present in acts of love that bring healing to the world.

Prophets are people who tell us about the midwestern farmer who several years ago had more hay than he needed and instead of selling it in order to make a nice comfortable profit, gave it to Native Americans in another state whose livestock were suffering because of a draught. And in that exchange formed friendships that are strong to this day. Other prophets work for equal pay or equal access to education. Still other prophets work to make institutions more just and fair for all people. Other prophets work to bring an end to poverty. Some prophets work for the healing and restoration of the earth, to create sustainable farming practices, to reforest areas that had been clear cut, or help clean up polluted water ways, and understand the changes happening with the Great Lakes and how to best respond to those changes, which is some of the work Northland College professors are doing in collaboration with local and world experts.

In other words, prophecy is now those who help call our attention to the highway of life Christ established, the very one Tom Cochrane discovered, that can be a source of joy in the world.

It's too bad the word joy has become associated with a jolly overkill of happiness. I'm not sure that was ever the intention of the word, at least not biblically. It's a word that we tend to hear more the closer we get to Christmas and it's too bad the word can make some folks believe this time of year they are supposed to fake extreme happiness. But joy was never intended to mean happiness. Joy is simply that connection to God, to the holy. Which means joy can be felt even when going through difficult times, which makes joy closer to hope than happiness.

Hope and joy, the things Isaiah wrote about and Jesus brought to us through his life, death and resurrection can be so much better and richer than revenge or judgement. Hope and joy can be a powerful form of resistance by being counter cultural in a world that tends toward despair and hopelessness. Because joy and hope can lift our spirits, like Tom Cochrane's, so that instead of feeling powerless in the face of difficulties, we can feel empowered. Even if things don't work out the way we want them to, we can keep following the Holy Highway knowing we aren't alone, God is with us through it all, from one day to the next.