

Sermon "A Holy Highway (NOT I-35)

Text: Isaiah 35:1-10

I've lived near several interstate highways. I-40, I-30, I-10, I-20. In those places near those highways, they're just a way to get in and out of town. But I've also spent several years living near and driving on I-35. No other highway is the topic of conversation like I-35. It's as if it has a life in and of itself. It has a personality, an identity, and a bad reputation. A reputation that precedes the recent reconstruction downtown. Say "I-35" to someone around here and there's an instant reaction, an involuntary tightness down deep in the gut that happens before you've even had a conscious thought. "I-35" doesn't get invited to all the best highway parties. They tell "I-35" to go stand in the corner. "I-35" gets shunned and cast aside.

"I-35"

I've driven I-35 quite a bit. In 1975 it brought me to Baylor as a freshman and from 2007 to 2010 it brought me back and forth to Truett Seminary every week for those three years. I've spent a pretty good chunk of my life behind the wheel passing exits for Elm Mott, West, Abbott, Hillsborough, Italy, & Waxahachie. I-35 stretches 1,558 miles from Laredo, Texas to Duluth, Minnesota. According to Google it would take twenty-two hours and fifty-six minutes to drive the entire length.

But that's not what gives you that feeling in the pit of your stomach when you hear the words, "I-35." No, what gives you that feeling is unending construction work, lane changes, rough pavement, concrete walls, countless tractor trailer rigs hurtling toward you, and traffic backups that happen without warning and seemingly without reason. The number of trucks continues to grow and the construction seems to be without end.

There are times when it seems as if simply getting on that highway is taking your very life and those of the ones you love in your hands. Who knows how many St. Christopher medals have been sold to I-35 drivers who felt the need to have a deeper connection to the patron saint of travelers?

Let's think a minute about "highway" as a metaphor. While Dianna Vitanza, Steve Swanson, or Tom Hanks are much more qualified than I to dig into metaphors, let me take a theological stab at it. "Highway" implies motion or progress. There's an assumption that something better is ahead or else why would you go? "Highway" also implies intentionality. When you get on a highway, someone has gone on before you to prepare the way. A route has been selected, materials and tools assembled, and a lot of work has been done to help you get where you're going. A lot of planning and labor for which the traveler owes a debt.

Our return trip to Waco yesterday afternoon had a whole different meaning to me after a week of thinking about highways.

In today's text Isaiah is talking about the most wonderful kind of metaphorical highway, a highway where hills are leveled and curves are straightened out. A highway that's wide and clear of traffic. A highway that passes through deserts that are in bloom and flowing with life-giving water, where wobbly knees are made firm, where weak hands find their power again, where those who are fearful find their strength.

This Advent we've been exploring some of Isaiah's messages to God's ancient people. Our first two passages were to a people under siege, whose safety, security, and very survival as a nation were at stake. Their enemies were at the gate waiting on the word to attack. But today's text was written to a people after all their worst fears had come to pass. The attack did indeed come and it resulted in their being carried off to Babylon, to exile, to

captivity. They were a people who had lost all hope – or so they rightly might have thought.

Isaiah tells them that their God is still around, even though the temple where they thought God lived was gone. In effect, they were learning that God was wireless. That God transcended even the temple God had commanded them to build.

And even more than that, Isaiah is declaring that God is building a highway, a way for their return – return to nationhood, to safety, to security, a return to *home*.

Have you ever noticed how much of the Bible happens on the move? Abraham was on a journey. The Hebrew people left Egypt to return to the Promised Land, a land none of them had ever seen. We usually refer to that as the Exodus. Later the people of God are gathered up and taken to Babylon. That's another significant biblical event, one that we commonly refer to as the Exile, when they were taken from their home to a strange and foreign land and held there against their will.

The idea of being on a journey, a physical journey, was not foreign to our ancient ancestors. Neither is it foreign to us.

Do you remember the first time you went home after leaving for school, or military service, or a job and career? Do you remember how wonderful it was to see your old neighborhood? To smell that home cooking? To see your old friends and renew time with your parents and your siblings? To sleep in your old bed? Do you remember those feelings of comfort, of familiarity, of safety and security? To be home is to snuggle up into familiarity. It's to return to that place where "everybody knows your name." We make those journeys this time of year. Going home is synonymous with Thanksgiving and Christmas. It's why the

highways and airports have their busiest days during the holidays. Year after year after year we all long to go home.

Mary and Joseph were on a journey home, too. Jesus was on a journey before he was even born. A pre-natal journey to Joseph's ancestral home so that this little family could be registered for the Roman census. (I wonder if Joseph got an extra tax deduction that year?) This little family no doubt longed for a different kind of highway. It wasn't an easy journey. It's about ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Imagine walking from Waco to Dallas. But add in a lot of hills. Walking uphill and downhill. Walking on loose rocks and mud. Slipping a sliding a lot. Imagine walking ninety miles in constant fear of being eaten by bears or lions or wild boars. Imagine being in danger from thieves, murderers and smugglers with every step. Imagine walking in winter, covered in thick, heavy woolen garments, made heavier by soaking rain.

Imagine taking that journey while pregnant. Nine months pregnant. Pregnant and unmarried. Imagine the shame and fear mixed in with unending fatigue. There's hardly any way that we can really understand what it felt like to make that journey. It's such a familiar story. We hear it year after year after year. Let's not let that dull our appreciation for how difficult it must have been.

Think with me about a family from Honduras. A nation with the highest murder rate in the world. A family struggling for food, clothing, and shelter. A family literally struggling to survive. Another struggle we really can't fully appreciate. They see their own highway. A highway leading north. And they're going to walk, too. But they're going to have to walk anywhere from 1,100 miles to over 2,500 miles to reach what they hope will be their new home. They're going to walk through lots of desert. They're going to be at the mercy of thieves, murderers, and smugglers. They don't know what will await them when they reach the border.

It's a story that repeats itself all across the world. Refugees are on the move. From Syria, from Iraq, from parts of Africa and Asia. In 2019, there are approximately 70.8 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. That breaks down to 37,000 people forced from their homes *every day* by conflict and persecution.

It's only by the grace of God that we're not on *that* kind of journey, too.

We're surrounded by people on journeys. We, too, are on our own journeys. Isaiah says that God has built a highway for us, a highway that leads home.

Isaiah describes a highway engineer's dream. A highway that makes I-35 look like a dirt path. It's a Holy Way, infused with the presence of God. It's a safe way, filled with protection from danger.

I especially like that it's a highway from which no traveler, not even fools, can go astray. I don't know about you, but I find that especially comforting.

And it's a highway filled with joy; glorious, magnificent, everlasting joy. Joy that can only be expressed in song. And a joy that chases away our pain and our hurts, our sorrows and sighing. I hear John's Revelation in these words of Isaiah.

But if I might be so bold, it seems to me that this highway is something more. It's a highway built on our own transformation. Transformation as individuals and as communities. It's a metaphor for change that can only come from God. Transformation is the way home. It's the way back to what God meant for us all along. It's the way back to true safety and

security, acceptance and love. *It's the way back to where everybody knows our name.*

It's transformation of both *who* we are and *how* we are. It requires us to embrace change in the depths of our souls, change that must work its way into the very manner we engage the world around us. True transformation leads to changes in the way we see the world, the way we see each other, and the way we actually engage each other. It creates safety in our souls that opens us to the variety of ways that we can partner with God to engage the world – *one* conversation, *one* person, *one* act of openness and service at a time.

What highway is God building for you? How can you partner with God on the construction crew? Reaching out somehow seems easier during Advent. People seem to be safer, our hearts seem to be fuller, our self-expectations seem to be higher. Ask yourself how you might act on God's transformative love this season. Maybe you need to pick some more stars off the mission tree in the hallway. Maybe you need to find some other way to help folks who are on their own journeys.

Lake Shore, we are an activist church. I know from reading our history. I know from seeing all the different mission activities in the newsletter. I know from seeing the mission tree in the hallway. I know from hearing your stories. But, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul: have we laid hold of it, yet? Is our transformation complete? Have we done all we're called to do? Have we become all we're called to be? It's a question we must all answer together. Since we are Baptists and are all called to be priests, we all have the privilege and responsibility to answer that question - for our community and for ourselves. But I know I have some work to do myself. I know that my transformation is not yet finished. I have some more mission I'm called to do. I have some more relationships I'm called to redeem. I have some more

selfishness I need to hand over to God. My transformation is not complete.

Transformation – It's a big word that means change. But it's change that goes to the depth of your soul, change that we can only attempt in partnership with God, change only made possible by God's coming Messiah, the one both on the way and yet also "already-here." It's change made possible by a glorious highway, built by God to take us home. Home to be what we were always meant to be.

A home that is filled with joy. Joy that is mine. Joy that is yours. And joy that we can only fully experience when we share it with others. That's the joy of Advent. When God brought that joy to earth in God's very person.

Thanks be to God. Amen.