

The Journey

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:47-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Listen again to the prophecy of Isaiah. "A highway shall be there (in the wilderness) and it shall be called the Holy Way... it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray... and the ransomed of the LORD shall ... come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." "A highway shall be there (in the wilderness)"

Highways are made for journeys. Built to get us to our desired destination. God is a great highway builder. He's provided for us a highway to the City of God. Isaiah calls it a highway in the desert. He calls it "the Holy Way". A highway for God's people. Take this highway and you'll never get lost. Those who travel this highway "shall come to Zion with singing." If that highway exists nothing could be more important than finding it. Traveling it.

Throughout history men and women have loved stories of journeys. The blind poet, Homer, sang the story of Ulysses' long and winding journey home after the Trojan War. The Latin poet, Vergil, immortalized the journeys of Aeneas leading him to Italy and the founding of Rome. The story of Marco Polo's journey to Cathay thrilled thirteenth century Europe. And today the story of the journey of the Apollo 13 crew to the moon and back has thrilled millions of people around the world. We all love stories of journeys.

Stories of journeys fill the Bible. Abraham leaves Ur of the Chaldees and travels to Palestine. God's people go down into Egypt where they become slaves. God delivers them from slavery and leads them on a forty year wilderness journey before entering Canaan land. Magi from the distant East follow a new star and journey far to worship Christ. Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem where he's crucified. St. Paul journeys from Jerusalem to preach the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire, to Rome and possibly to Spain.

Journeys. St. Augustine described the entire history of human race as a journey from the Garden of Eden to the City of God. That was his response to those who became hopeless after the fall of Rome. On the night of August 24, AD 410 the barbarian Goths captured Rome and looted the city. The Imperial city which had ruled the world for so long was sacked by barbarians. Civilized people despaired. They sensed that the sun was setting on civilization. A dark age loomed on the horizon. Word of the sack of Rome reached St. Augustine, a North African bishop. In his book, The City of God, he explained the meaning of history for Christianity. History is not meaningless. History is not an endless cycle of events. History is going someplace. History is the journey of the human race from the Garden of Eden to the City of God.

Poets and Novelists remind us that our individuals lives are journeys. The medieval Italian poet Dante saw his own life as a journey. In the opening words of The Divine Comedy he says,

Midway the way of life we're bound upon,

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

He's middle aged, he says, and he finds himself in a dark wood. He doesn't know which way to go. There's no path to follow. No highway.

Many modern people feel that way. We wake up in the middle of life to discover we've lost our way. We've lost our childhood faith in Jesus Christ. The corrosive acid of skepticism eats away and destroys our faith in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The business of our lives, buying and selling, leads us away from that Highway Isaiah spoke of. Many of us lose any sense of the meaning of life. Moral relativism says there is no right way. There's no path but the trails we blaze on our own. We wake to find ourselves in a dark wood with no roads.

But Christians believe that God has come to us in Jesus Christ to show us the way out of the dark wood. ^{John The Baptist prepared the way.} Jesus was born to show the way to people who've lost any sense of the meaning of life. Jesus came to show us the Holy Way Isaiah spoke of. The way that leads to the City of God. The way that leads to joy and gladness. The way that leads to Zion, ~~the City of God.~~

In the movie, "The Poseidon Adventure", an ocean liner is turned upside down by a tidal wave. The ship is sinking. The only way out is up to the bottom of the ship. One passenger proclaims, "I know the way! Follow me or you'll be lost!" The other passengers have no way of knowing for certain that he's trustworthy. But some follow him. He leads them up to the bottom of the ship. Then he dies so that the passengers may be rescued. He reminds me of Jesus. Jesus was born to show us the

way. Jesus says, "I am the way... no one comes to the father, but by me." "Follow me!", he says. His way led him to his death on the cross. But his way leads us to life and to joy and to the City of God.

The Christian life is a journey. We're on a journey to Zion, the beautiful City of God. We're pilgrims. None of us has arrived at our destination yet. None of us has final answers. None of us has a monopoly on the truth. None of us have arrived. T.S. Eliot describes our journey honestly when he wrote, that Christians are

Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet
following no other way.

Some say that at the end of life's journey there's nothing but darkness. Nothingness. Life is a long days journey into darkness.

Into the darkness they go the wise and the lovely...
...gone to feed the roses.

We're all destined to be nothing more than food for worms.

Some say that the history of the human race is a wheel of never ending cycles. They say that history has no meaning. It's going nowhere. We're just spinning wheels. It takes faith to believe that. It takes no less faith to believe life ends in darkness and history is a tale told by an idiot than to believe the Christian story.

Christians believe that at the end of the journey there's a loving father waiting and a dinner. At the end of the journey is joy - everlasting joy and gladness. We believe that each individual life has a purpose and that purpose is fulfilled by

the coming of Jesus. Not only individual life but **human history** **as well** has a purpose and that purpose is fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. It takes faith to believe. Yes. It takes faith to begin the Christian journey. It takes a step of faith to get on the highway God has shown us through Christ. But it isn't blind faith. Jesus has traveled the way of life through death to resurrection. "I am the way", he says. "I am the highway in the desert that will lead you to Zion." Therefore "strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, fear not!'"

Let us pray:

God of the coming years, through paths unknown

We follow Thee;

When we are strong, Lord, leave us not alone;

Our refuge be.

Be Thou for us in life our daily bread,

Our heart's true home when all our years have sped.

Amen.