

## The Highway of the Lord

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Advent, December 15, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28.

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

From the beginning of human history men and women have traveled on roads. The first roads followed trails made by animals. Many trails led to watering holes. People followed the trails to hunt for animals and to find life giving water. Little by little people learned to improve trails by moving rocks and cutting down trees.

The Romans were the first people to build roads on a large scale. They designed roads to last. Some are still in use after 2000 years of wear and tear. The Roman road builders knew that good roads required a lot of planning and hard, back breaking work. First they dug a trench from 3 to 6 feet deep and about 12 feet wide to make a base for the road out of stone blocks. Each stone block weighed 20 or 30 pounds. Next came a layer of small stones tightly packed together and bound with cement. On top of the cement and small stones was another layer of pebbles and rubble set in more cement. The surface was made up of large slabs of smooth hard stone.

The Romans took great efforts to make their roads straight, even where the land was uneven. Roman engineers cut across hills to make their roads straight. They built stone arch bridges over rivers to make straight their roads. Straight roads made for good communications. At the height of the Roman Empire a letter could be sent over Roman roads from London to Rome in three days - often faster than mail delivery today.

John the Baptist surely had Roman roads in mind when he cried out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord." He was talking about road building. Christ is coming. Prepare a road - remove all obstacles - make it straight so that the Lord may come straight to us and our loved ones - and quickly.

In the summer of 1967 I was a seminary intern at the Oak Lane Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Dr. Richard Armstrong was the pastor and my mentor. He's one of the most effective spiritual road builders I've ever witnessed. Oak Lane had been a wealthy, upper-middle class suburb of Philadelphia. After World War 2 the white middle class fled the city, and Jews and African Americans moved into the spacious homes which had been carved up into apartments. The Oak Lane Presbyterian Church began to die on the vine because no road building took place between the Presbyterian Church and the new people moving into the community.

Dr. Armstrong arrived as the new pastor in 1956. Like John the Baptist he cried out to his session and congregation, "'Make straight the way of the Lord'. We must build roads to the new people moving into Oak Lane." Some of the congregation didn't want to build roads. They left the congregation for greener pastures in the suburbs. Most of the congregation stayed and learned the difficult task of building roads to people who were so much different from themselves.

*Volunteers from the Church visited*  
Every home in the community was visited, not once, but many times in order to clear obstacles from the way of the Lord. It took a long time to develop the callers. There were a lot of failures over the next ten years. But eventually the Oak Lane

church became a shining example of a multicultural church whose worship reflected the racial and cultural diversity of the old and new members.

I think especially of a road that was built to an old Jewish man - I'll call him Jacob. Jacob had no family. He lived alone in a second floor apartment. He had throat cancer that required a tracheotomy. He couldn't communicate clearly. He made only inarticulate sounds. And Jacob could not travel freely. Increasingly he found it more and more difficult to get out of his apartment.

But the road builders from the Oak Lane Presbyterian Church made straight the way of the Lord for him. They visited him. They didn't call upon him to make a decision for Christ and then leave him never to return again. They visited him again and again. When he was no longer able to drive his car, they did his grocery shopping for him. They took him to doctor appointments. They provided a way. And they listened to him talk mournfully of the old country and friends and family long gone. The members of the Oak Lane church discovered spiritual road building hard work.

But one day, months later, after the road site had been cleared, after the rocks and obstacles had been laboriously removed, after the foundations had been layed, and after the pavement had been put in place, Jacob asked <sup>as best we could</sup> one of the roadbuilders, "May I go to church with you on Sunday?"

So the road builders brought Jacob to church. He continued to come Sunday after Sunday. He sat in the aisle in his wheelchair. He couldn't sing because of his tracheotomy. But he

held the hymnal and lip synched the words. He began to smile again. He found new meaning in life. One Sunday he wheeled himself forward to the front of the sanctuary and Jacob confessed his faith in a fellow Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. Dr. Armstrong baptized him. Jacob, who had no family, found himself surrounded by a family larger than he could ever realize - the family of faith. One day Jacob died - not alone in his apartment - but surrounded by several road builders who held his hand, and told him that they loved him and prayed for him. Several days later, the Oak Lane Presbyterian Church was packed with his brothers and sisters in Christ. The congregation sang, "For all the saints who from their labors rest." Tears filled their eyes. Tears of sadness. Tears of joy.

--Wonderful things happen when God's people make straight the way of the Lord. But road building is hard work. Road building is labor intensive. Road building is not a job for just one person. But God calls us. God calls you. "Make straight the way of the Lord". The Oxford Presbyterian Church has built a beautiful building. Now build roads. Build roads that will lead people straight to Jesus!<sup>Build Roads That will open lines of communication between husbands/wives, children, parents, neighbors</sup> Remove obstacles that keep people in our community from<sup>knowing one another &</sup> coming to Christ and serving Christ within the church.<sup>it's not a no shut deal... continual.orging.</sup> I can't think of a more important challenge for our church in 1997. Build roads! Make straight the way of the Lord.

Let us pray: Eternal God, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son. Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose and openness to hear your will, that we too may prepare the way for Christ who is coming in power and glory to establish his kingdom of peace and justice; through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.