

Rev. Seth D. Bode † Sermon 351, 12-15-2019 † Advent 3

“Lord God, you have appointed me as pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument – but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, we would see Jesus.”

ISAIAH 35

¹The wilderness and the desert will be glad. The wasteland of the Arabah will rejoice and blossom like a crocus. ²It will bloom lavishly, and there will be great joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. It will be excellent like Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make the shaky knees steady. ⁴Tell those who have a fearful heart: Be strong. Do not be afraid. Look! Your God will come with vengeance. With God’s own retribution, he will come and save you. ⁵Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unplugged. ⁶The crippled will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy. Waters will flow in the wilderness, and streams in the wasteland. ⁷The burning sand will become a pool, and in the thirsty ground there will be springs of water. There will be grass, reeds, and rushes where the haunts of jackals once lay. ⁸A highway will be there, a road that will be called the holy way. The impure will not walk there. It will be reserved for those who walk in that holy way. Wicked fools will not wander onto it. ⁹No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious animal go up on it. They will not be found there, but only the redeemed will walk there. ¹⁰Then those ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with a joyful shout, and everlasting joy will crown their heads. Happiness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.



The highway to Carmel never looked so nice, did it? A year ago I met an old-timer at our local chamber of commerce. As we conversed, he wanted to explain to me how he and a select few other people had this idea for Carmel, Indiana, mapped out as this northern corridor stemming out of I-465. He went on to tell me that they found just the right up-and-comer in our present mayor, Mayor Brainard, and the rest is history.

Now as you drive your way north from Indianapolis, you are flanked by relatively tall buildings on your left and right. Isn't it a path to rival God's majesty?

Of course the Carmel spoken of in the Bible isn't exactly Carmel, Indiana, but a word meaning, "vineyard of God," and it is a promontory along the Mediterranean Sea with fertile slopes. Not too far is a maritime plain called Sharon, extending north from Joppa, also rich in soil and life. And if you keep going, you arrive at Lebanon, where kings of old cut the cedars for Solomon's temple.

It's not the same as Carmel, Indiana, is it? Those ancient places seem a little closer to God, a little less commercialized, and a little more sacred. Yet not even those beautiful places were actually the focus of Isaiah's Carmel Highway.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus, you and I could travel long, glorious roads to some heavenly destination; but as long as we live on this earth, we will never feel quite at home. As long as Jesus has not returned to bring us to heaven, we believers will feel sinful, set aside, and stuck. Until His return, we will never be able to say, "Now I see and hear and walk and speak clearly." Not until you are finally travelling along ...

Isaiah's Carmel Highway

What Isaiah really does here is catch up with the Church of God, God's people, those who trust in the Messiah to soothe and heal them; yet the true Church of God are those who are weary and worn-out and running on empty, as if on a desert highway.

Sure, the imagery is like that of a sudden oasis. Where there once was a jackal-infested, dry and dusty trail, we now suddenly see latent pools and blooming flowers. Where once there were lions and ferocious animals, we now suddenly see grass, reeds, and rushes. You can almost visualize how a sad, tattered path gradually changes, now trickling with the sound of flowing water, and then bursting with the colors of foliage. Formerly where there was total dryness, now streams and pools and springs.

We catch up with the Church in these verses when it seems forsaken and without glitter or decoration. The Church shows up without any power, human wisdom, or

ostentatious holy deeds. All the same, we catch up with the Church just in time to see it flourish. This is the Church flourishing inwardly. This is the joy welling up in our hearts when we look forward to the coming of that babe of Bethlehem.

There were already true worshipers in the time of Isaiah, as well as the time of destruction to follow. They hoped against all odds that the promises could be true, that the Messiah would somehow come and could somehow snap into place with every prophecy foretold. They were not many, but a remnant of those sent to exile. They were not the powerful, but the meek and humble. They were not outwardly great, but they had faith in the good news. They were not merely bound to the formal rites and motions of worship, but they believed in their hearts, and they ate up every Word of God.

If you know your sins, you wouldn't expect to be on this "Holy Way" to God. You would rightly ask, "Who can ascend the way to the Lord?" If you know your natural, sinful state, you understand that you cannot bring any miraculous moisture to cause fertility and growth and richness to your destination. You cannot solve the problem of sin any more than you can wish an oasis into existence on a desert path.

However, notice who is on this highway. It is not the winners of first-place trophies. It's not the best dads, the best moms, the most obedient children, the most reliable friends, or the most generous, giving neighbors. It is the redeemed; it is the ransomed. That means the sinners who were bought back—the spiritual rejects whose sins were solved (and whose souls were saved) by the Lord. It is the children of God for whom the babe of Bethlehem came. It is the believers in Jesus Christ whose hearts He enters. It is the partakers of His Word and sacraments, the means of grace, who travel Isaiah's Carmel Highway. These are the ones who know that this Jesus Christ paid the price for their sin. These are the ones who by faith accept Him as God and man. These are the ones who trust in His death and atonement for the whole world—even the insignificant. For the babe of Bethlehem sure seemed insignificant when He came, and yet ... at His coming, it was a reason for incredible shouts of joy.

You see that on Isaiah's Carmel Highway, it's not just the ground and plants that are rejuvenated and refreshed. It is also the people walking this path. The blind see, the deaf hear, the legs of the lame no longer limp, the mute speak. But it's more than that. Isaiah makes it sound like the healing is augmented and magnified. The blind become seers, the deaf are given supersonic hearing, the

lame aren't just walking, but leaping with joy and gladness. The mute not only speak, but they chant and sing.

Are we like that? Can we find that kind of joy somehow? It seems so unfair. You and I may feel that we have put in the long hours of love and obedience to our Lord, of patiently waiting for His second coming. But where is it? Is He truly coming? Can we possibly wait any longer? What makes it worse, our families are torn apart with sinful problems and difficulties getting along; our work schedules and jobs expect us to travel long hours; our lonely moments seem lonelier when no one seems to understand or to be able to label our pain and hardships; and the times when the Law has pricked our hearts, but it seems there is no one to hear our apology. Is Jesus really on His way?

Then you realize that these people on Isaiah's Carmel Highway weren't physically blind, deaf, dumb, and lame. But as they traveled this difficult Highway of life's trials and hardships, they had learned to see, hear, speak, and walk by faith. Where there is the preaching of the Word, there is moisture and joy. As they plodded along, it was the Word that enlightened and regenerated them. As they limped on rugged paths, the gospel showed them how to walk, even leap with joy. As their ears were opened, it was notes and chords and arpeggios of what Jesus had done for them. As their knuckles dragged, it was a Word of Christ that showed them how use their hands again for Him alone.

Suddenly, you realize that those people on that Highway are you. They are us, God's Church, fighting our way through the desert of life in this world, contending with every step against sin, death and the devil. God sets us apart on our way and surrounds us with the water of life, the newness of faith, and patience for just a little longer. Not only do we see, hear, speak, and walk; we have eyes of faith, ears attuned to God's Word, tongues to sing His grace, and feet that leap to show love.

For it was the coming of the Messiah in our hearts that changed the Highway, saved the Redeemed, and heightened the Mood. Steady and reliable, good old faithful Messiah came first with hidden glory. Yet He promises to return with majestic beauty. It will be worth the walk of faith.

But as you see Him coming, closer with every step, don't forget to put your hands and legs to work in His kingdom. Don't forget to sing, cry out, shout, and praise Him with a joyful heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.