

## STRAIGHT HIGHWAYS

Isaiah 40: 1-11

A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens

December 4, 2011

*A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God...."*

Many people here remember what it was like to take a trip before the Interstate system was built. Every highway was two-lane. If you were stuck behind a big truck, you were just stuck, especially if you were driving on a winding road through the mountains. You could crawl at 5 mph for what seemed like hours. And with no air conditioning, the windows were all open, and you breathed in the exhaust from the truck ahead of you. It was not a pretty picture.

### I

It was President Franklin Roosevelt who first expressed interest in developing a network of superhighways as one way of providing more jobs for people out of work. But when he presented the idea to Congress, his opponents just considered it a big-spending plan that would wreak havoc to the nation's budget. Congress was slow to move forward, and besides, America was about to enter World War II.

Years before Congress was debating the merits of an interstate system of multi-lane highways, a young Army officer named Dwight D. Eisenhower

participated in the very first transcontinental army convoy. It began in Washington, DC and traveled to San Francisco. On the way west the convoy experienced all the woes drivers were accustomed to experiencing on those two-lane roads. It took that convoy 60 days to reach Union Square in San Francisco! That experience would influence him later when he was President. Another experience that had a profound influence on him occurred late in the war when Eisenhower reached Germany and was impressed with Germany's autobahn network. He saw the advantages of being able to move goods easily from place to place.

In 1953 Eisenhower became President of the United States, and he orchestrated what today we would call a "Grand Bargain" between those who were staunchly opposed and those who were enthusiastic supporters of the new highway system. The present Interstate System was the result of compromise, something many in today's Congress seem to think is a dirty word.

But today we take interstate highways for granted. We no longer need to travel on Route 9 to go east or west in Massachusetts. We can make the trip in half the time on the turnpike. We no longer need to drive on old Highway 1 up the coast of Maine. I-95 can take us all the way to the border of Canada or, if we drive south, all the way to Miami.

## II

I mention that recent history about the Interstate Highway System as a way of thinking about this familiar text from Isaiah 40: *...make straight in the desert a highway for our God*. This is an image, a picture, of a special kind of highway, a highway that we desperately need today. It is a picture of a *highway for our God*.

Countless people are seeking that highway. We have highways for everything else! There is a highway for fame, a highway for fortune, and a highway for power, but people are not finding spiritual satisfaction traveling on those other highways. This is an image of a highway that connects us to God, a highway that enables us to reach a spiritual destination, where we can feel at peace with our God and ourselves.

Like I-95, it is a very well traveled highway. Zooming past us on this highway for God are the big 18-wheelers. They are like the mega-churches, some of whom think they own the road and wonder why the rest of us are even bothering to travel on it! Then there are those pesky motorcycles roaring past us, swerving in and out of the traffic. They are like those who think they can travel the way to God all alone. But most of us are traveling along in mid-sized vehicles, all different makes and models of denominations, churches, study groups, and support groups.

One of the defining characteristics of a highway is that a highway is open to anyone, not a privileged few. A highway is public; it is not a private roadway. When you enter the *highway for our God* there are no customs agents checking to see if you are worthy, no one will inspect the baggage you are carrying (and all of us carry baggage), and no one asks about your economic status or reputation. This highway is open to all. But there is one catch: this highway is a toll road.

And what is that toll? You must be willing to travel that road with others. There are many other travelers on the *highway for our God*. It is a communal journey. The Governor of Alabama will have to travel that highway with undocumented workers. Newt Gingrich will have to travel it with Occupy protesters. Rush Limbaugh will have to travel it with Michael Moore. It is truly a busy highway.

### III

When you hear a familiar text like this, *...make straight in the desert a highway for our God*, some of us will think first of the tenor voice early in Handel's *Messiah*. But what I hope you will also hear is this ancient prophet's voice crying out a contemporary word for our generation. The desert is an image of whatever separates us from God. The highway is the route on which we travel to encounter the living God, to fill that empty spot in our soul.

The valleys and hills and rough places represent difficulties—past experiences, disillusionment, guilt—whatever makes the highway to God difficult for us to travel. The poetic voice in this text cries out that those hills will be lowered, the valleys will be leveled, and the rough places made plain. What an image for us! How we long for such direct encounter with God.

And there is a surprise in this text. You can see it in the wording: *...make straight in the desert a highway for our God!* The highway, in other words, is not just for us to travel; it is also for God to come out and meet us. The divine meets us on our journey! This highway is not like the yellow brick road on which Dorothy and her companions travel to the land of Oz, where they are disappointed to find that the wizard is really a fake.

This highway is a meeting place, a rendezvous, an appointment with the divine. Once we begin that journey we discover that the search is not just on our part. The search is also on God's part, for God too is on that highway looking for us. That is the reason we refer to Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us. That is the reason Christmas is such a joyous celebration. Beneath all the hoopla, there is the assurance that God in Christ has reached out to us and found us.

## IV

One of the reasons we love Christmas is the constancy of the Christmas traditions. Since 1939 this church has sung the “Choral Evensong.” Every year we relish the same carols, use the same decorations, wander through the mall listening to Bing Crosby, and light candles in the darkness on Christmas Eve. Year after year, when so much is changing, there is a constancy about Christmas. Long after we are gone from this earth, children will still have a hard time getting to sleep on Christmas Eve, and “Silent Night” will still be sung to candlelight.

For beneath all the celebrations is THE celebration: *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* That baby would grow up to show us the way, and he would leave us with those words which we repeat every time we observe the Lord’s Supper: *This is my body given for you...this is my blood shed for you.* In his very suffering he meets us on the highway of humanity.