

SERMON TITLE: "A Highway to Hope" (Summer Road Trip Series #1)
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 35:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 2, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A number of you have asked me where I went on my vacation. Sadly, in this year of the coronavirus, it's pretty hard to travel anywhere safely. So, instead of our usual road trip to Oregon or Montana to see our mothers, Steve and I had a staycation. My days off mostly included binge-watching some TV programs and sleeping late every morning, doing a lot of reading, and catching up on projects that needed to be done at home. But one day Steve and I did take a drive up into the Ogden Valley. We checked out Causey Reservoir. We drove into a campground and sat for an hour or so at a picnic table and read our books alongside a lovely and peacefully-babbling creek. Northwest of Liberty, we hiked up a mountain trail to a waterfall. And, while it was still daylight, we located the North Fork dark sky park. Then later on that clear moonless night, we returned there, laid out a blanket on the ground, and gazed up at the magnificent stars in God's heaven.

All that was restful and good. I'm so grateful that David and Austin Barron made it possible for me to have some much-needed days off. Thank you again, David, for organizing and leading worship the past two Sundays. And thank you, Austin, for using your cell phone to record and post the services to Facebook Live.

So, yes, I had a good staycation. But I have to say that I did miss the vacation ritual of going on a long road trip to someplace far away. Since maybe you have been feeling cooped up like that too, I decided that--before summer comes to an end--we would devote this month of August to biblical-style road trips. Each of these five Sundays, we will explore a different Bible passage about a road and see what it has to offer us in the way of spiritual scenery and wayside wisdom. Today we begin with Isaiah 35 and the Highway to Hope.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Let's begin with some background on this scripture. The book of Isaiah is long; it has 65 chapters. Biblical scholars are pretty sure that this extensive body of scripture known by the one name *Isaiah* was originally written by multiple authors over four or five centuries. This much-compiled and much-edited book of Isaiah contains references as far back as King David, 1000 years before Christ. The Isaiah voices speak of the destruction of Jerusalem that happened in 587 BCE and the resulting exile in Babylon. And some of the verses with the most joy and hope speak of the days when God would bring the Jewish exiles back home to Zion and restore their city and temple. Other verses in Isaiah go even farther to imagine a great day when people from all over the world will come to worship God in Jerusalem and when peace will be so great in the land that even wolves, lambs, leopards, goats, snakes, and human children will be able to get along with each other.

1—HIGHWAY TO HOPE PROVIDES SCENIC BEAUTY

Isaiah chapter 35, which we have read today, comes in the middle of all that. These poetic verses proclaim the glorious and hope-filled day when the Babylonian exiles will return to Jerusalem. And, boy, oh boy, what a wonderfully scenic route that is! We can't help but perceive how fantastic it will be when we read that "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

This description is like *The Wizard of Oz* movie when the black and white landscape suddenly bursts into color. Or maybe it's like one time when I was driving through southern Montana and the hills were absolutely covered with purple wildflowers. Or I remember a time when I was driving in California and the hills were blanketed for miles and miles with some kind of yellow blossoms. Maybe you've been on the road somewhere and seen a similar sight: when the blossoming of life from the earth just took your breath away with its beauty.

We recognize Isaiah's description as a highway to hope because those returning exiles would not only see the beauty of radiant flowers but also the glory and majesty of the Lord. You can wonder, can't you, which comes first? Do they see the beauty of the landscape because they already know the wonders of God? Or will the magnificent palette of nature help them to perceive God's artistic and powerful hand at work in their lives?

The Pacific Ocean is like that for me too. Many a road trip over the years has landed Steve and me on the Oregon coast. When I stand on an Oregon beach and view the ocean's great expanse and hear and feel the powerful surge of the waves, that tremendous body of water helps me perceive the magnificence of God. And maybe too, my belief in God's omnipotence and transcendence helps me to recognize and appreciate the awesome immensity of those vast blue depths and breadths.

Whichever way we're led—to see the glory of God through nature or to see the world around us through the eyes of faith in God—we're led along a path of pleasure and joy and beauty. Everything seems better, as we travel the highway to hope.

2—HIGHWAY TO HOPE PROVIDES HEALING STRENGTH

According to Isaiah 35, the highway to hope also provides God's healing strength. In verse three, the prophet calls for weak hands to be strengthened and feeble knees to be made firm. I'm sure many of us would appreciate some of that healing strength! I think of those with arthritis, bursitis, sciatica, and neuropathy; those who have no padding left in their joints; and those who suffer from aches and pains that steal away the ability to walk and lift and squeeze, or even to concentrate. Yes, we know about those problems, don't we?

Well, the prophet Isaiah indicates that those who are willing to step out on faith will gain the strength and ability to move along on this highway to hope. "The eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless [will] sing for joy." Waters will appear in the wilderness desert, so that the burning sand will

instead become like a cooling spring. Whatever we need for our strength and healing will be found along this highway to hope.

As we travel this route, we discover that God has mitigated all kinds of dangers for us. Verse nine indicates that no lion or ravenous beast shall hurt us. Along this highway of strength and healing, we feel our anxiety and stress dissipate; we can sense our blood pressure and pulse finding their regulation. As the factors of fear are replaced with reasons for rejoicing, we let down our guard and enjoy our journey along the highway to hope.

3--HIGHWAY TO HOPE IS REDEMPTIVE AND HOLY

Verse eight gives us one more description of this highway to hope. Isaiah tells us that “it shall be called the Holy Way.” Those who travel along this road will be people of faith whose hearts have been redeemed by God’s forgiving grace. Yes, you have to get cleaned up to travel this journey, but God is willing to work with anyone who wants to try. In verse eight, Isaiah assures us that “no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” The highway is clearly marked, and the guard rails are up. If we stick together with God’s people, we’ll find our way from start to finish. Those whom God has liberated will come into Zion with joyful singing. The gladness they feel won’t be temporary or fleeting. As Isaiah says in verse 10, “everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.”

Of course, the prophet who wrote these words was thinking primarily about his own Jewish people who needed God’s help in gaining freedom from Babylonian captivity. The imagery is all about those liberated people traveling that long distance in the Middle Eastern region of southern Mesopotamia. But today we can apply this scripture to ourselves as well. Are we stuck somewhere geographically, physically, emotionally, or spiritually? Are we in a rut in our profession or our relationships? Do we need God to redeem us from that bondage and set us on the highway to hope? Our amazing and awesome God who created the earth is certainly capable of recreating us in God’s holy image, so that we can set out on that journey toward eternal joy.

As I was preparing this sermon, I remembered the Pete Seeger-Arlo Guthrie song “You Gotta Walk that Lonesome Valley.” While the song emphasizes the necessity of every person making the individual, or “lonesome,” choice to walk in faith, the song also tells about biblical heroes like John the Baptist and Daniel in the lions’ den. The song suggests, too, that we might have parents and siblings who love us and are praying for us. Even though we each have to decide for ourselves to walk the path of faith, we have a lot of people encouraging us to get walking on God’s redemptive and holy highway.

CONCLUSION

Traveling the highway to hope isn’t always easy. Like the Friday night closure of I-15 that prevented traffic going both north and south at the Gentile Street bridge and like the State Road 158 construction happening between Pineview Reservoir and Powder Mountain, there can be delays and detours that certainly test our patience and cause us trouble. But even with those challenges, we know that the positive goal is to create safer infrastructure and smoother traffic flow. Likewise, God is constantly planning and working to create for us a better life journey.

With scenic beauty, healing strength, and the redemptive holiness of God, what are we waiting for? Let’s hit the road! Let’s get traveling on the highway to hope.