

SERMON TITLE: "God's Highway"

TEXT: Isaiah 40

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: James Toews

DATE: June 28, 2009

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed . . . Isaiah 40:1

There are times when Isaiah is a hard book. It is an oracle about a nation on a road to disaster. Balanced people don't enjoy such descriptions- even and especially when they are true and accurate. But if the warning doesn't go out- how will anyone change his ways? Those warnings are critically important.

Isaiah however loves his people and when the oracle shifts to God's love the language is as beautiful as it was devastating. God calling out to the people He loves.

We have been going through Isaiah using the themes he uses. They are the themes that latter writers also picked up on. Today we look at the theme of the God's Highway. Isaiah 40 is one of several places that it shows up-

A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Isaiah 40:3

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Isaiah 40:4-5

God Has A Highway

Isaiah introduces a picture of God's highway into his oracle. This was a picture that ancient people would have a very specific response to. You and I take highways for granted. We live in a world of wheeled modes of transportation and there is almost nowhere that we don't go that doesn't have a roadway- even a paved roadway.

But in the world before the wheel was assumed to be the way to move things- people walked and those who walk only need trails- not road.

But there were roads in the ancient world and because they were not as common as they are for us- they were notable.

The roads of that time- like today were public works projects built by the kings and their purpose was to enable goods and people to move to the key points in the kingdoms.

The most famous road of Isaiah's time was a highway that connected the ancient kingdoms of Assyria and Egypt. It was a highway that went straight through the Israelite kingdom. This was a highway that had simply evolved and developed over the centuries. It has evolved from a trail to a major pathway for herds of sheep and camels to a highway that chariots and wagons could move along. But the time of Isaiah it was the grand highway of its day.

The people of Isaiah's time would see the traffic on that highway as it passed back and forth between these 2 superpowers.

There were also other types of highways. These were those highways that kings built to bring the people to the centre of the kingdom.

We have all heard the saying, "All roads lead to Rome." As the Roman empire

grew and the Caesars grew richer they built roads that would bring people from the far reaches of the empire- to Rome. It was all from the glory of the empire.

It is this picture of the king's highway that Isaiah brings to his oracle. A grand highway built for the purpose of bringing God's people to a special place.

Once the picture goes into our mind- the picture is beautiful- a wide highway through all the varied countryside- smoothed out for God's people to travel on.

But what is the meaning and significance of it all?

Not surprisingly it ties into some of the other images of Isaiah such as the "day of the Lord" and the "mountain of the Lord."

First, the day of the Lord climaxes in salvation. God had a great plan for His people.

Second, the mountain of the Lord represents the place where that salvation is. When we come to the mountain of the Lord- we are at the place where that treasure is.

So how do we get there? That path is God's Highway. And that highway exists with a call that goes out-

The call to travel this road goes out far and wide-

... I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Isaiah 43:5-7

And how do they come back? Via the highway of the Lord.

Think of the phrase "all roads lead to Rome." But this road doesn't lead to Rome- it leads to the mountain of God- to the place of salvation.

In fact in some ways- this is the "highway to heaven." The reason that there is a need for salvation is that things have gone wrong. In the specific case of Isaiah's nation they have turned away from God's way and have been scattered.

This is a picture that anyone who has lived in a refugee culture understands. The world is full of refugees- people who have been displaced from their lands and are living, often in miserable conditions.

Some weeks back we had a presentation by Ron Fuller about the refugees in Kenya. They live in the worst of conditions just sitting there waiting for something.

That is the picture of the world, for Isaiah. Not every refugee camp is a slum- some are as pleasant as any suburb in Nanaimo but for displaced people the craving to go home remains in their hearts.

Isaiah is writing to a people who understand being displaced very well. Already the part of the nation, the North, has been taken into captivity by the Assyrians. Even though there was animosity between North and South- they still understood themselves to be one people and the idea that half the family was now displaced was wrong.

And why is a "highway to heaven" needed? Because, like a song by the 80s rock band indicates- we are naturally on a "highway to hell.

"Highway To Hell"

Living easy, living free

Season ticket on a one-way ride

Asking nothing, leave me be

Taking everything in my stride

Don't need reason, don't need rhyme
Ain't nothing I would rather do
Going down, party time
My friends are gonna be there too
I'm on the highway to hell
No stop signs, speed limit
Nobody's gonna slow me down
Like a wheel, gonna spin it
Nobody's gonna mess me round
Hey Satan, paid my dues
Playing in a rocking band
Hey momma, look at me
I'm on my way to the promised land
I'm on the highway to hell
(don't stop me)
And I'm going down, all the way down
I'm on the highway to hell. AC/DC

That is a highway that the world is on and while it can sound very appealing in a rock song- the reality of it soon hits people very hard. This week Michael Jackson died. He lived at the very top of the pyramid of everything that this world's culture promises. There was nothing on earth out of his grasp. But almost everyone would agree that in the scale of misery he was on the highway to hell and his death is sad because of the tragedy of it all.

And so Isaiah puts out the call- it's time to come back home. Get off the highway to hell. God has a highway of His own- a highway to heaven.

... to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' Isaiah 49:9

What a word for those on the highway to hell. And what is that word? First-

#1. This Is A Highway For Everyone

EVERYONE is to get onto this road. Absolutely everyone.

There are all kinds of reasons why people might think that they aren't invited to get on this highway.

Some people feel that they are just too bad. No one can read Isaiah and seriously think that they have gone too far to be called back. If anything that the graphic descriptions of the sins of the Israelite people should make us realize is- this people had messed up as far as it is possible to mess up- and yet God keeps calling them back. "Comfort, comfort my people" is a word that goes out to people who have blown their chances again and again.

Some people think it is too hard to travel this road- they are handicapped by some disability. Isaiah goes out of his way to show that this highway is a place where those with handicaps have no disadvantage-

Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf. Isaiah 43:8

And what happens when the blind and others with disabilities get on God's Highway? Isaiah talks about that too-

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy . . . And a highway will be there . . . Isaiah 35:5-8

This is a highway on which no handicap is a barrier.

There are times when people get frustrated that certain minority groups keep getting preferential treatment. When that is abused the frustration is understandable- but preferential treatment for those who have been disadvantaged is actually very Biblical.

The Bible goes out of its way to let us know that those who have handicaps symbolize His love for us.

But there are others who feel excluded and Isaiah touches on 2 more groups that are even more excluded than those with physical disabilities-

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." Isaiah 56:3

Some feel excluded because they are from the wrong "tribe." This was a world of tribes. If you were in the tribe you had all the rights- if you were not in the tribe- you had none. When Isaiah that the foreigner is NOT excluded he is making a very radical claim. The Israelites saw themselves as God's tribe. This was a very powerful designation- to be sure. But on this highway the only question is- to whom are you bound?

Some feel excluded because they will never have family. This was a world of tribes and families. A person's prestige was measured in offspring and mates. In many ways things haven't changed. The ultimate prize is still having children.

But what about those who will never have children or spouses? Are these people excluded?

No, says Isaiah. Even this is not the measure of how we fit into this highway.

This is a highway onto which every single person on earth is invited to travel.

Application-

I hope you have already started to make a connection here. You and I, if we have turned ourselves off the highway to hell, and declared our allegiance to the Lord- are the travelers on this highway and the values of God's highway must be our values.

And what else does Isaiah say by with this picture?

I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up. Isaiah 49:11

#2. God's Highway Is Very Visible

We live in a time when a highly visible road isn't always appreciated. Not long ago when upgraded road to Whistler was being planned- the fact that the hillside would have a great scar cut across it was seen as a desecration of the mountain.

In that debate there was an understandable battle between those who feel that the uncut mountain has a higher value than a road to take people to Whistler. To some degree that is a fair debate.

But when your object is to get people somewhere, mountains are generally a problem- just as they on the road to Whistler. A road through the mountains needs to be

cut into it. Like the highway to Whistler that means it is very high and visible.

In this case- that is exactly what it is supposed to be- highly visible.

God's highway leading people to salvation and this is not a secret path known to only a select few.

It is fun to have secret paths that take you to very special places. The latest book we are reading in the old childhood classic- "The Call Of The Wild." It is the story of the Gold Rush that took place in Alaska and the Yukon.

Fortune hunters came from all over the world to dig gold out of the ground. Those coming were driven by lure of "mountains" of gold. Treasure beyond the wildest imagination existed in their minds.

But the road to those treasure were inevitably secret hidden roads and those few miners who did find a load- took great care to hide their trails.

The normal human response to a dream is to keep it to themselves.

The other reality of the gold rush is that those who actually found treasure were almost invariably destroyed by it.

God's treasure is a real treasure and it is good without any hangover. But the other aspect of the treasure is that the road to get to it is as visible as it possibly can be. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world . . ."

When God made a plan for salvation- that plan is extended to everyone. If it is extended to everyone- then the road that takes that many people there needs to be very wide.

This has several implications for us. First, it means that private faith is not the faith of God's Highway.

No wonder this needs to be a big visible highway.

At a very superficial but important level I think it even is reflected in how we come to worship. We are doing renovation and I hope that in making the changes we reflect this goal to be visible.

I hope that even our building says to those who pass by-

Pass through, pass through the gates! saiah 62:10

The rest of the verse also instructs us however-

Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations. Isaiah 62:10

#3. Our Job Is Highway Building

Why John the Baptist began his preaching mission before Jesus he came with this message [specifically Isaiah 40]. It is a message of instruction to those who hear. Clearly we are to get onto this highway but we are also to be builders and repairers of this highway.

When Iain and I trekked to Everest base camp we regularly passed those working on the path. The path was in constant need of repair and upgrading. Without the constant work by the repairers of the road- it would soon fall into disrepair and become impassable.

We are not just travelers on this highway- we are its keepers- looking for places that are dangerous or prone to cause people to stumble.

There was a time when the term "seeker sensitive" church was popular. I always thought it was a very good term. As God's people it is our job to keep this road in pristine condition.

We of course know that, in as much as you and I represent the highway of the Lord, there are a good number of things that are not up to speed. One of the things that we need to take seriously is that our actions are causing people to trip up. People will trip- may that on because of our negligence or sin.

But even beyond this we are to look around ourselves and ask- are there ways that we can make this a safer, wider, more level roadway, this highway to heaven?

That is the constant question of the church.

And along with that we are to put up banners pointing people to the on ramps of the highway of God.

And we do this most naturally and effectively when we ask people to join us as we walk.

How do we do this? By actually inviting people to join us. The most effective way to get people to come to church is when someone asks them to come.

Last-

#4. It Is A Long Road

This of course shouldn't surprise us- after all it is the highway to heaven. Traveling it is a life long journey.

But there is something about long roads that we better not overlook. Isaiah 40 introduced the Highway of God and I hope you are inspired by the vision- BUT don't let inspiration cause you to miss the obvious fact that on long road there are times- sometimes long stretches of hard pressing.

Yes, it is a road for everyone. No one has an advantage or disadvantage- we all have to take it- and sometimes it passes through "the valley of the shadow of death." That is not fun.

Sometimes it passes through seasons of discouragement- sometimes pain- sometimes conflict.

Sometimes the road is frankly hard. And when things get hard- we complain. "Where is God? I thought that this was suppose to be the road where the lame leap and shout? I don't feel like leaping and shouting. My bones act and my heart is broken."

Isaiah knew this was coming and answers-

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Isaiah 40:27

And what does Isaiah tell his people when they feel beat up? He gives them one of the most beautiful promises in the Scriptures.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Isaiah 40:28-29

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:30-31

We all get weary from time to time. There is no promise that we won't. The promise from the God of the Highway is that from those who walk on His Highway will renew their strength.