

Faith Mennonite Church
December 15, 2013 - Advent 3
O, the mystery of God's dwelling!
Joetta Schlabach

Highways and Holy Ways
Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

One of the most lonely, desolate times in my life occurred on the side of a highway. A couple years before moving to Minnesota, when our family lived in northwestern Ohio, I was traveling to Columbus to visit a friend who had just had surgery to remove a brain tumor. I sailed along the interstate, taking for granted the luxury of high-speed travel, and thinking more about my friend than any of the people with whom I was sharing the highway.

Then, as I slowed a bit to exit onto a by-pass and head into Columbus, changing gears in the process, I realized I had no clutch. So I pulled over and put on my hazard lights. I didn't have a cell phone so there wasn't much I could do except hope that someone would stop and offer assistance. No one did. After sitting in the car for some time, I noticed highway maintenance workers in the median area and tried to shout to them. Whether or not they heard me, they didn't respond. So I decided to stay outside of the car to indicate that I needed help. Still no one stopped. I wasn't truly alone for there were lots of folks on the highway, but they just kept speeding by. I increasingly felt very alone, very small, helpless and vulnerable.

Now the story had a good end. A tow-truck driver finally stopped. He couldn't tow me because he was answering another call, but he did take the time to stop, let me use his phone to call road-side service, and in a short while I was towed to a mechanic who lent me a car to drive to the hospital to visit my friend while he assessed the problematic clutch. Later in the day the mechanic advised me that all that was needed was to tighten a cable, so by evening I was back on the road without a huge repair bill—with a borrowed cell phone from my friends since I would be returning home alone in the dark.

Highways have been with us since ancient times. Highways are a basic piece of infrastructure critical to the economic development of a country. Because they are ubiquitous and in generally good condition in our car-oriented society (at least when it's not snowing!) we either take them for granted, consider them a basic right, or at least think of them as a primarily positive element in society.

But highways have a dark side and they always have. In the ancient world, highways developed along paths originally created by ordinary folks walking to maintain relationships and communication with family or acquaintances in other places. Paths became highways as power and resources were concentrated into the hands of kings or wealthy families who wanted to increase those resources and power through trade and through the movement of military forces.

At the time that Isaiah wrote his vision of a highway becoming a Holy Way for *all* people he and his neighbors were no doubt familiar or aware of the “King’s Highway” or the “royal road” which ran from Damascus in Mesopotamia to Hejaz in the western Arabic coastal region and then across the Sinai into Egypt. Once a path that was likely travelled in part by Abraham in his wanderings, by Moses and his liberated band leaving Egypt, and by kings David and Solomon in the early years of the Jewish monarchy, this road increasingly became a highway controlled by the powerful and competing regional elites and their armies. Later, during the time of Jesus’ birth, it would be controlled by the Roman Empire.¹

In our own country the interstate highway system resulted from legislation in the mid 1950s, the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act, through the powerful lobbying clout of General Motors and Standard Oil. Train tracks, that provided a network of public transportation, within states and across the country, were literally ripped up to give cars and oil a monopoly.

“But in the process of laying 42,793 miles of limited-access pavement,” wrote Justin Fox in a 2004 article in *Fortune* magazine, “the Interstate builders changed America in ways few could have

¹ <http://earlyworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/03/kings-highway-and-way-of-sea.html>

imagined in 1939 or even 1956. The Interstate system was sold as a savior for both rural America and declining urban cores; instead it speeded the trend toward suburbanization at the expense of both city and country. It was heralded as an antidote to traffic jams; instead it brought ever more congestion. It was seen as a shining example of progress and good government; by the 1970s it had helped sour Americans on the very idea of progress and good government. And who would have thought that better highways would help make us all so fat?"²

Now clearly there are many good things to say about highway systems. They allow us to travel with moderate ease to visit friends and family and to conduct business. But communities with the least resources are often negatively impacted both as highways are built and in the aftermath of their construction. Urban African American communities, including the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, have usually not had the clout to keep an interstate highway project from plowing through the center of their communities, often decimating thriving business districts and removing the social heart of the community.

And afterward? Each and every day millions of people across the country and here in the Twin Cities, myself included, drive through the heart of neighborhoods like old Rondo and north Minneapolis without even realizing it because we are speeding by too fast to notice, or the communities are separated behind embankments or lie below the overpass that runs above them. Thus highways contribute to the problem of racial and economic segregation in our cities across the country. Highways allow us to be like the priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan story, not taking the time to stop because we can't see what might call for our attention.

So what would Isaiah's vision look like today in our setting? Who are the blind, the deaf, the lame, the hungry and thirsty ones in our urban deserts? And how might our highways become Holy Ways for them? What will it take for persons in North Minneapolis and the east side of St Paul, who have experienced the trauma and fear of stray bullets or pedestrians being cruelly beaten to strengthen their weak knees and go out singing with everlasting joy upon their heads; having obtained joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing fleeing away?

Isaiah's dream was and is a big dream indeed. It can seem unreal, unattainable. One of the persons in our Tuesday morning group at Trotters asked as we read this passage, did this ever happen? Can it happen? Is it only future? It's often easier to feel paralyzed by the current reality than to dream this messianic, kingdom of God reality.

But Isaiah said (in a verse that we didn't read) that on this Holy Way "no one, not even fools, shall go astray." You see, every little action even of the most foolish among us, no matter how small, is used by God to lay down another paving stone on this Holy Way. When we come to an intersection with a panhandler, even if we don't give money, we can look the person in the eye and acknowledge them as a fellow human traveler. I try to keep granola or cereal bars in my car so I can give them out and have that momentary human exchange. It's pure charity, I know, but I don't underestimate the human interaction.

If there's a part of town that you've never been in, especially because you've feared going there, find someone to go with you. (Melissa Falb would be a good guide to North Minneapolis.) Go into a store and buy a few items or into a restaurant and have a meal. Listen to the conversations and note the concerns and the aspirations of those around you. That's how highways become Holy Ways.

Some of you will remember Charity Kroeker who attended our church for a time several years ago. She left us, not because she wasn't comfortable here, but because she wasn't comfortable elsewhere. She shared how she had driven into north Minneapolis one evening to babysit for friends who lived there and she noticed that she was filled with fear. She decided she needed to face that fear. The first part of facing it was recognizing that she had never had any meaningful relationships with persons of color. She grew up in a white community, went to a mostly white college, was working and worshipping primarily with white folk. So she decided she needed to seek a church that was predominantly African American so

² Justin Fox, "The Great Paving How the Interstate Highway System helped create the modern economy—and reshaped the FORTUNE 500" *Fortune*, January 26, 2004.

she could build relationships of trust that would help overcome her fear. She moved from the highway to the Holy Way.

Last week in sharing time I mentioned the vision of Growing Hope Farm in Osceola, WI, which has connected their CSA with the Phillips neighborhood through Urban Ventures. Transporting fresh, organic vegetables to families who depend largely on food shelves and SNAP and rarely have access to fresh, affordable vegetables turns a highway into a Holy Way.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus sends a message to John the Baptist who is imprisoned and seems to be having second thoughts about how things are going. John avoided the highways, hanging out in the wilderness and preaching repentance. But like many others, he may have expected Jesus to mount a horse and take the highway, to take the road of power and might. And so he sent a message asking, “are you really the one?”

And Jesus responded with Isaiah’s vision: “Tell John that the blind are receiving their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, and the poor are receiving good news. We’re on the Holy Way!” And then he asked the crowds why they went to the wilderness to listen to John? Did they go looking for someone in fine robes? No; if they had done that, they’d have taken the highway to the palace. But they knew the answer didn’t lie there, not on the highway and not in the palace. They sought the wilderness road, the Holy Way, and began to see the flowers beginning to bloom there. And Jesus said, John was a great one, but he’s no greater than the least in the kingdom of God, because we’re all called to the Holy Way...a way for *all* the people.

May we keep longing for this way...dreaming of this way.. and moving from the highway to the Holy Way in small ways...everyday. May God be our help!