

message: that's not good enough. There is a different path that's created when we express the love of God. And everytime we do, God is glorified. If you want to do something special for Christmas consider supporting our Care Share fund.

This is how we "prepare the way for the Lord" and reveal the glory of God's coming so all humanity can see it. When we see the bumps, complications, obstacles and challenges in the lives of people around us; when we appreciate how we can make their path straighter, flatter, easier; and when we express God's love in helping that person.

This is what John the Baptist was declaring to the world, announcing the coming of the Son of God to be Emmanuel: God with us. Luke's account of this story makes this point so very clear. We read in Luke that when the crowds heard John's message they asked "What should we then do?" What should we do to prepare the way? And John told them "The man who has two coats should share with the person who has none. The person who has food should do the same." And Luke's story goes on. We hear the tax collectors ask "What should we do?" and John replied "Don't collect any more than you are required to." Then we hear the soldiers ask, "What should we do?" and John replied "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely." This elaboration of the story of John the Baptist and his message is so very helpful because it is saying "each of us is unique" and so each of us can have our own unique way of preparing the way.

What's your way?

## "Life is a Highway"

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Text: Isaiah 40: 1 - 11

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To understand the great significance of this passage one needs a bit of Jewish history. In 587 BC the kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and that conquest was devastating. The Temple was destroyed, the city walls torn down, the 400 year reign of Jewish kings ended. In the final indignity the ruling class, wealthy and artisans of Judah were deported to Babylon to live as captives. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah reflect the prelude to the conquest...and warns of the conquest. Isaiah warned "all this is coming, unless you return to faithfulness to God." Chapter 40 picks up the story again after the conquest, after the 50 year exile. The Jewish people understood that exile period as God's judgment on them...as a severe act of tough love, intended by God to compel the chosen people to return to faithfulness. So chapter 40 is the heralding that the time of tough love was over. This is captured in God's voice "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for." That era was over and change was coming. Coming in a BIG way!

In this passage we hear the voice of a heavenly herald announce: "Prepare the way for the Lord. Create a highway for the coming of our God. Make it straight and flat. For God is coming down this highway and the glory of the Lord will be revealed. All humanity will see God's glory!" It is to be breath-taking. It is to be God-revealing. And what was to be revealed? The end of our passage says two things. The power of God will be revealed. But also God's love and care. We read, "He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart." For the hearers—the people of Judah—this announcement would have lifted the spirits of a people who had no hope. Now there was hope. God was coming. Things were changing. The glory and the power and the love of God was to be revealed. It was coming at them down God's highway. Centuries later in Jesus' day this passage was near and dear to the hearts of the Jews because they saw the prophecy's fulfilment in their own history. The deported Jews did return to the promised land. The walls were rebuilt. The Temple rebuilt. The Jewish faith was reformed. Across the breadth of their historic restoration they saw God's glory and power and love.

500 years after that moment captured in Isaiah 40 the first Jewish followers of Jesus saw God doing the same thing again in the coming of Jesus into the world. In Isaiah 40 we hear the voice of a heavenly herald declare these things. Now, in all four gospels, it was the voice of John the Baptist. As it says in the Gospel of John, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert “Make straight the way for the Lord.” In Mark’s gospel John the Baptist explained, “There is one who is following me, who is far more powerful than I am. I am not worthy to stoop and untie the thongs of his sandals.” God was again coming down a similar kind of highway but this time it was the Messiah, the Son of David, Emmanuel, the Son of God. This time it was not just God, but the Son of God incarnate in human form!

A highway that is straight and flat is indeed worthy for such a coming. But the thing to notice in the gospels is that WE are to prepare that highway. The heavenly herald of Isaiah and John the Baptist of the gospels both direct their listeners “Prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.” We are the ones who are to make the highway straight and flat. And with that observation this glorious image moves from just being magnificent to also being daunting.

I think Canadian singer-songwriter Tom Cochrane is right when he says “life is a highway”. We know a lot about life, and a lot about highways....and there are many similarities. Both can be bumpy, complicated, and filled with choices, obstacles and challenges. Life’s highway is plenty hard enough for us to navigate let alone create a flat and straight highway for God! The Son of God did come into the world 2,000 years ago, and that coming has reverberated with dramatic change ever since then. But the world still needs Emmanuel—God with us. The world still needs to see God’s glory, to be influenced by God’s power, to experience God’s love. For Jesus to truly be Emmanuel—God with us—that highway still needs to be created, generation after generation. So we are still in the business of building highways.

How is it that we are to build this highway for the coming of God into this time and this place? The goal of “prepare the way for the Lord” is made clear in Isaiah 40: it is for the revealing of the glory of God so all humanity can see it. So, what we do in life is to reveal God’s glory. OK...then how do we do that? I would suggest we are actually doing it when we do three things: when we see the bumps, complications, obstacles and challenges in the lives of people around us; when we appreciate how we can make their path straighter, flatter, easier; and when we express God’s love in helping that person. In other words, the glory of God is revealed when we see the life highway of people as it is, then we see it as God would have it be, and then we do something about it.

Let’s take the most famous highway story in the Bible as an example: the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man traveling the highway from Jerusalem to Jericho fell into the hands of thieves who attacked him, beat him, robbed him and left him for dead on the side of the road. It would seem fortunate for this victim that two of his countrymen...two very faithful Jews (first a temple priest then a Levite) would come upon him. But they didn’t help. They kept their distance. The priest and the Levite saw in that man’s tragedy the highway of life as it is. People can be victims. And they also understood the obstacles on the highway of life. Priests and Levites ministered in the Temple. For that work they had to maintain ritual purity. If they touched the man in need they would have to go through an elaborate process of re-purifying themselves. That was the rule, that rule was an obstacle, and the priest and the Levite simply accepted this as “that’s how life’s highway is.” The Samaritan, however, saw the same person in need but he also saw a different path: the path that expresses God’s love. And so he helped a Jew—a Jew!—who needed help. The Jewish listener would have been caught off guard by this surprising detail in the story. Jews and Samaritans would do nothing for each other. Yet this Samaritan did, by expressing the love of God, leveling and flattening the highway of this man’s life.

For us it can be so simple. For example, the Salvation Army kettle drive at Christmas enacts this very well. Their fundraising at Christmas is an acknowledgement that there are many, many people in this city who face bumps, complications, obstacles and challenges on life’s highway. The many volunteers who stand by the kettles are there to express the love of God in order to help people address their needs. And as they do this, people who see them in the malls will recognize that these volunteers are Christians who are giving their time in Christian service. And in that act they are showing forth the glory of God. In that act they are silently telling the people who walk past: there is a different path we can walk. And every time a person chooses the path of God’s love, God is glorified.

Another example is the Care Share fund of Varsity Acres Church. I have never served a church that had a fund like this. It is wonderful. Because of that fund we are able to help people who are facing their bumps, complications and challenges in life. Just in the past couple of weeks we’ve called upon the fund to help three families of our own congregation who are victims of the downturn in Calgary’s economy...a downturn that continues to get stretched out. Many people in our city might look at these situations and say “well, that’s what life’s highway can bring.” They can say “that’s what employment insurance is for, what social assistance is for.....and like the priest and the Levite in their own way walk past on the other side of the road. But here at Varsity you have a fund that declares a different