

The Subway and the Way

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Advent 3 (Year A [Matthew 11:2-11, Isaiah 35:1-10])

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As many of you know, and as I am sure many others of you suspect, my natural habitat is probably a library basement. I love being surrounded by slightly dusty volumes sitting upon rarely visited shelves. I love the quiet; I love the smell of old paper and glue; I love the sense of discovery. But most of all I love traversing the interconnected web of human inquiry and spinning little segments here and there of my own. It's a web because everything that has been known, and thought, and studied, and written is connected to something else that has been known, thought about, studied and written down before.

I remember a time two-thirds of the way through seminary at Princeton, in the basement of the library, shortly before closing time, picking a book on Biblical interpretation off the shelf that had itself been footnoted in another work. As I turned through it, I suddenly felt in a deep new way how important, how absolutely critical, it was that the Bible itself is a library, an interconnected web — not of human inquiry but of divine revelation.

Of course, I'd been reading the Bible for two decades before I went to seminary; I knew how cross-references worked, how one passage of scripture would quote or refer to another. I knew that if you looked in a good study Bible or commentary, at Matthew, chapter 11, verse 5 (which is on the back of your readings sheet this morning), you would see a reference to Isaiah, chapter 35, verses 5-6 (which is on the front). But I can't say I've always been sure it mattered, or what it meant to a gathering like this.

There was a teacher in the church in Rome in the second century named Marcion. Marcion said out loud what many Christians, both at the time and since, felt. He said, "Hey...this God in the Old Testament, uh, sometimes he seems like a bit of a jerk. This can't be the same as the God of Jesus. Let's just get rid of the Old Testament – and while we're at it, let's also get rid of the New Testament stuff that sounds like the Old Testament." In practice, this meant tossing everything except an edited version of the Gospel of Luke and most of the letters of Paul.

Marcion was a little more subtle and thoughtful about it than the way I presented it, but that was the gist of it. Keep Jesus, and define "love" as "being nice," and leave the rest of it out. Since then, most Christians haven't actually cut out the bulk of the Bible (with the famous exception of Thomas Jefferson who literally took a

razor blade to the thing). Instead, Christians have too often been content just not to read huge sections of it.

In the second century the church's reaction to and rejection of Marcion was swift and vehement. And it boiled down to this: God — both in the Old Testament and the New Testament — is a God of promises, the Biblical term for this is 'covenant.' In his own ministry and then in his death and resurrection, Jesus clearly understood himself to be fulfilling the promises of God contained in Israel's scriptures. In turn, he made new promises about the kingdom of God and eternal life. And the best argument that God will do what Jesus promised is that in Jesus God did what had already been promised.

Advent, more than any other time of year, encourages us to read some of the passages from the prophets in which God makes promises that were only truly fulfilled in Jesus (hundreds of years after the prophecies themselves were written). The Isaiah passage we read is one such promise. And in our Matthew passage Jesus speaks in the imagery of that passage.

Let's look at the Isaiah passage first. Verses 5-6. "Then the eyes of the blind shall 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 sing for joy." Now, Matthew. In this passage, John the Baptist, who is in prison, has sent messengers to Jesus asking if he really is the one God has promised. And Jesus replies, not with the exact words, but certainly in the spirit of that passage. Verse 4: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf here, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." He didn't quote Isaiah, obviously, but the imagery and language Jesus used certainly echoes Isaiah.

These sorts of connections are all over the Bible. If you were to somehow print the entire text of the scriptures on one great big sheet of paper and draw lines between all the passages that are connected like this, you could visualize that great interconnected web of divine revelation that I talked about.

We could imagine it like a spider web, but there are a lot of bad connotations there. What about subway map? Imagine there's a little station here at Matthew 11:5, and you can get in and zoom across the text to Isaiah 35:5.

The first time I ever rode a subway by myself was in Paris. I was 16 years old. I'd landed in Europe for the first time not quite 24 hours earlier with eight of my friends. After a bus into the city center, we'd been split up into pairs to stay with families. My best friend and I were hustled off by some very talkative gentlemen in overalls to the 13th arrondissement where we tried to pretend to like stinky cheese and eventually crashed in the attic bedroom. The next morning we woke up and

had to take the subway to school. See, supposedly there I was there to learn to French. Not much came of that, but I did end up learning how to French kiss. But first I had to learn how to navigate the transportation system.

Our host family got us to the subway station, where we were laughed at as we tried to buy tickets with our broken French. Then we got into the subway car where we kept constant vigilance right next to the map posted next to the door, so we wouldn't miss our stop.

We succeeded, got out of the car, and headed up the escalators to the surface. And this is the part I will never forget. It was still early, the morning chill hit us as we stepped into the sunlight. The street cleaners were out; there was a newness and freshness. We came out on the bank of the Seine, and walked across the river (guidebook in hand as a map, of course) to the Ile de la Cite, made a wrong turn to head in directly the opposite direction from our school, and almost immediately found ourselves standing across from Notre Dame Cathedral, gleaming white in the morning sun.

Here we were, two disoriented boys from suburban Dallas literally speechless, struck with the freshness, breadth, and glory of the world all at ones at 7:15 am on a Monday morning. It was glorious.

My point is, when you get to the subway station, we all know what to do...leave the station and see what else is around there. Because there is some good stuff just around the corner. Something worth checking out.

Traveling across scripture works like that too. It's good to see the connection between Matthew 11:5 and Isaiah 35:5-6. But once you travel over to Isaiah, it's worth exploring what's around the station a little bit. Have a look around. What else is here for us?

Or to put it another way: Jesus answers John's question, "Are you the Messiah?" by referencing Isaiah 35. What can the larger context of this Isaiah passage tell us about what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah?

Let's turn the corner and go down a block or two to verse 8 of the Isaiah passage. Isaiah starts talking about a highway, called the Holy Way. It's a highway for God's people.

This highway has some wonderful qualities; not least among them (at the end of v. 8) is that is impossible for anyone, even fools, to get lost. Now all you women out their breathing a big sigh of relief — it's not that we men get lost, we're just explorers. But even if, hypothetically, we did get lost sometimes — it wouldn't happen on this Holy Way highway.

This highway shall be safe. Obviously the poetic metaphor in verse 9 about lions and ravenous beasts would need to change in our day, as our highways are much more dangerous to ravenous beasts than ravenous beasts are to modern day travelers. It might say something like, “No accidents shall happen there, nor shall any multi-car pileups happen upon it.” Whether a lack of ravenous beasts or accidents, in either case, the point is this highway shall be safe.

And then in verse 10, those that travel upon this road will be joyous. There will be no sadness; but everlasting joy.

So this road will be holy, safe, and joyous. And then, the most important thing about it — those on it, the “ransomed of the Lord,” shall travel upon it to return to the Lord. Verse 10 says the road shall bring them to Zion, which is the dwelling place of the Lord.

Now remember, this is poetic language. Isaiah is not speaking of a literal highway, nor is he suggesting that the Messiah is going to come as some construction worker on US-75, driving a grader or closing down HOV-lanes for no acceptable reason (not that I’m bitter about that at all). Isaiah is poetically describing God making a way, a Holy Way, for God’s people to return to his very presence.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus, by connecting his work as the Messiah to the promises of God’s salvation in Isaiah 35, was telling John’s disciples “I am fulfilling these promises of God.” We had to go back to Isaiah to look at what all those promises were, and then we find that Jesus was saying not just “I am performing miracles on sick people,” but something like “I am making it possible for God’s people — those who have been excluded, too blind to God’s love, too deaf to hear God’s word, and too lame to walk in their own strength — to get on the way back to God.”

Just so you know, there’s no chance I’m making some unjustified interpretive jump here. Jesus himself, in the 14th chapter of John’s gospel, says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Early Christians identified themselves as followers of “The Way” (see Acts 24:14).

But what you don’t get without going to some place like Isaiah 35:8-10 is the beautiful poetic description of that promised Way. You never come around the corner and get struck by the power and beauty of the vision if you don’t get on the subway and travel over to Isaiah. This Bible is a book about one God, who does one thing, seeks to restore his people to himself. To read only part of it only impoverishes ourselves; which is why I’m willing to spend a sermon teaching you how the Bible works and how you can read it more deeply.

But I want to end with a final word about this image of the way. I obviously find these last three verses of our Isaiah reading a deeply compelling image; I wouldn't have written this sermon if I didn't find the poetry so powerful.

But when I look to place myself in the poetry, to enter into it as a character, I can't help but notice that all the people on the road are moving: traveling, walking, and returning. If Jesus, as the Messiah, as the fulfillment of God's promises, came as the way to God, then we have some moving to do.

This is not just a spiritual wandering. "Being on a journey" is often an excuse for being lost; but remember verse 8. This is not a getting lost highway. No, the movement God calls us to in this life is a focused, purposeful traveling on the highway in the direction of God.

John the Baptist started with a question about who Jesus is, and — questions about Jesus have a tendency to end up like this — the answer ends up having something to do with what we are to do.

Whether you feel very close and confident in your relationship with God this morning, or whether you feel yet far off, the way to God begins and ends with Jesus. If you will travel on the Way, in prayer, praise, and practicing imitation of his life, you shall return to the Lord with singing; everlasting joy and gladness will be yours not just at the end of the journey, but every step of the way. That's what God promised. And God keeps his promises.