

The Way of the Lord

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Texts: Matthew 3: 1-6

So, I woke up a while back, looked out my window, and all of a sudden, I was living on a one-way street. I realize that sounds more like the start of a blues song than a sermon, but it's true. For those who may not know, we live in a parsonage just down the road. As part of Cambridge's Vision Zero Bike Safety plan, the city decided to turn our two-way street into a one-way. And while there has been a long and ongoing community engagement process, the changes themselves happened overnight, literally, when a bevy of bright lights and work crews appeared one night in the wee hours to switch out signs, repaint street lines and install those flex post thingies that stick up out of the road. By 7 am, the work was more or less done, and for the next two weeks, we watched the chaos ensue as commuters, passers-by and even Google maps tried to adjust accordingly. My initial take at this point? As a biker, I like it - mission accomplished, more or less. As a driver, no big deal, a little re-routing here or there. Spiritually though, and to my surprise and yours that there even is a "spiritually" here, I've grown into a big fan of living on a one-way street! Sure, it's just a metaphor, but I feel like the changes have brought a subtle and simple gift that I've noticed in my body as I leave my house. It's been helping me start my days with a little less look-both-ways caution. I head out into the world with a little boost of new energy, a clearer sense of direction, and purposefulness. I mean the way ahead can't be clearer. There's only one way to go. It's the definition of a one-way street, right? And yet, you'd be amazed if I told you how much resistance we've witnessed - cars that come down the nearby cross-street, thinking they can still turn right, bikes and scooters going the wrong way in what are now one-way bike lanes because they can't be bothered to cross the street. For a full two weeks after the shift, the city had to station cops at the corners just to help people manage the psychological transition. I kid you not...we've watched them stop multiple people from driving the wrong way, some of whom were doing it intentionally just because they knew it was faster. We saw one guy try to sneak past a cop who was standing right there, albeit on his phone. The cop walked all the more into the street, right up to the guy's windows, and shouted "hello...do you see me?" and the guy was *still* creeping along as if he might get away with it!

Enter our scriptures for the second week of Advent. From Psalm 25, "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. From our choir anthem that echoes the theme: Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes. From the scripture Ahmaad read at the top of the service: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And from earlier in Isaiah, some beautiful lines I can't resist adding in, from chapter 35: "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." From Isaiah 35 "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." Finally, our classic Advent text from Matthew describing John the Baptist, that premonitory and wild voice in the wilderness that quotes Isaiah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Clearly. The Bible has a lot to say about which way God wants us to go and the paths on which we travel!

Backing up and zooming out for a moment: this Advent season, we are opening ourselves to wonder! We are taking cues from the prophets and angels that say Behold, a star, Behold, a child, Behold I bring tidings of great joy! For this Sunday, I invite us to "behold," to watch for and wonder together about

another regular feature in our Advent and Christmas stories and that is the Way of the Lord! Just what is this ancient way and how might it help us make our way through the world today?

First, there's a helpful literal connotation to Hebrew Bible imagery that I've shared with some of you before. Did you know that the first recorded use of asphalt was in Babylon, about the time our text from Isaiah was written, near 625 BCE? In fact, Isaiah's images of roads and highways are rooted in ancient engineering practices that were all about creating safe, efficient travel for Kings. Royal engineers and workers were commissioned to cut through hillsides and smooth uneven roads. Timely, this week, no, given the Royals recent visit to Boston? For the ancient Israelites, these oft-used images for the "way of the Lord" may well have sparked their dreams of finding a way out of exile and captivity, or a blessedly one-way trip home to Jerusalem. But let's be clear, for Isaiah, and later for John the Baptist, they were "preparing the way" not for a departure but for an arrival, the arrival of holiness itself, for the very King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Prince of Peace! Seen in this light, the Way of the Lord is both a literal and figurative path on which the Anointed One, the Messiah and his, her or their feet may trod!

More broadly, the term "Way" is used here and throughout the bible as a metaphor for a set of worldviews, values, customs, and manners of life. The theme often invokes not just one way, but a pair and it sets before us choice. Consider a few examples - the way of life and the way of death, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. In Proverbs, we find wise ways or foolish ways. In Paul, there's a former way of life that is distinct from a new way of life in Christ. John the Baptist reveals this when he says "Repent." Repent, as in turn from the ways of this world and these earthly kingdoms, turns towards another way, another baptism, another kingdom entirely, and see how the road rising to meet you even now, the kingdom is drawing near! And yes, of course, there's Jesus' famous response to Thomas who asked in John's gospel "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How will we know the way?" Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Sadly, this beautiful line has become a so-called "clobber text" and a litmus test of "true believers," especially among Christian nationalists and supremacists, yet clearly, the original context had nothing to do with excluding or denigrating other pathways to God. We all must say "no way" when we encounter these dangerous misinterpretations. As importantly, we must proclaim and reclaim a Jesus who came preaching that the way *is* love, the truth *is* love, that life *is* all about God's radically inclusive love.

Church Historian Diana Butler Bass, who visited us here several years ago, has written powerfully on these themes. In her book *Christianity After Religion*, she writes: "Although Western Christianity would eventually be defined as a belief system about God, throughout its first five centuries people understood it primarily as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful *way of life* in this world — not as a neat set of doctrines, an esoteric belief, or the promise of heaven. By practicing Jesus's teachings, followers of the way discovered that their lives were made better on a practical spiritual path. Indeed, early Christianity was not called "Christianity" at all. Rather, it was called "the Way," and its followers[before the terms Christian came into use] were called "the People of the Way." Members of the community were not held accountable for their opinions about God or Jesus; rather, the community measured faithfulness by how well its members practiced loving God and their neighbor. Not offering hospitality was a much greater failure than not believing that Jesus was "truly God and truly human." Early Christians judged ethical failings as the most serious breach of community, even as they accepted a significant amount of theological diversity in their midst. (p. 149) Amen?

Bass situates these observations in broader reflections about how the capital C Church has changed substantially in recent years. Those that are bucking the trends and thriving are no longer following a

centuries-old pattern of the 3 B's - Belief, Behavior, and Belonging wherein members are asked first to say what they believe, then to commit to acting in certain approved ways, and then and only then, are they welcomed to belong. She claims instead that some churches - and I would count ours as one - are in the midst of what she sees as a Great Reversal - that begins with offering people a sense of welcome and belonging, and then inviting people to practice their faith, then exploring how the so-called beliefs of our tradition are related if not foundational! She writes: "Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision for what it means to be Christian in the twenty-first century... We belong to God and to one another, connected to all in a web of relationships, and there we find our truest selves. We behave in imitation of Jesus, practicing our faith with deliberation as we anticipate God's reign of justice and love. We believe with our entire being, trusting, loving, and devoted to the God whom we have encountered through one another and in the world.Belonging, behaving, and believing—shifted back to their proper and ancient order." The Great Reversal, she claims is not only a great reawakening but is a "Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a *way of life* practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God's reign of mercy and justice."

To these three B's, provocative as they are, I would offer one more: Beholding! Yes belong, behave and eventually believe but what if it's all for the purpose of beholding? Behold a star, with thanks to James Webb! Behold the beauty of this sanctuary, and of the ancient and new songs that stream into our souls, of a table set for all! Behold elders and ancestors and angels and prophets that have prepared the way. Behold when a child is born and baptized, behold our descendants who *will* yet live to see the days for which we strive! Imagine the goodness of it all. Belong *to*, behave *as*, believe *in*, yes and... behold ... the way of the Lord! It's right here. This is the way!

Not there just yet? I don't blame ya. In our world these days, it's so, so easy to feel that we or our entire species have irretrievably lost our way. Even if we ourselves are just having a bad day, or we forget about or lose our faith for a stretch. When we know it's wayfinding potential is there, it's GPS for our souls sometimes goes offline just when we need it most! Or maybe we think that the church writ large has gone the wrong way too many times. Can't we see God standing there - "hello - I'm right here." Back it up! Repent! Turn it around!

In closing, I have a poem by Edwin Muir that may help us out. It's written as a dialogue, or maybe a prayer, with every other line italicized, as if to be expressed by a mysterious, interlocutor!

Friend, I have lost the way.
The way leads on.
 Is there another way?
The way is one.
 I must retrace the track.
It's lost and gone.
 Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.
 Then I'll make here my place,
(The road leads on),
 Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
 Stay here, forever stay.

None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh, places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.

Maybe we can hold onto to just that for today - the way leads on! What a thing - to not only prepare the way, this Advent Season, but to trust that the way - its unfolding, it's leading, its rising to meet us where we are - *leads on*. With or without us, it leads on! No matter how anxious or afraid or stuck in our ways, just try it! Behold - the way of God! It leads on! As we continue our spiritual reawakening in this season, as we awake together, and look outside our windows, think about it and give thanks. There is one way for all of us - the way of life and love - our direction and path is clear, and the way leads on. The way leads on - in all our radically inclusive belonging, in courageous behaving, in our truth-telling believing and in our wondrous beholding. The way leads on in Love! May it be so. Amen.

