

Sermon for Sunday, November 29, 1970 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"GOD'S FREEWAY"

Isaiah 40:1-11

Text: "A voice cries; 'in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Isaiah 40:3

Under King David and his son Solomon the little nation of the Jews came to be one of the great powers of that day. They were a far cry from that ragged band of half-starved refugees that had crossed the Jordan River under the leadership of Joshua, looking for a place to call their own. But after King Solomon, things did not go so well and the nation split. The Northern Kingdom, under such rulers as Ahab and Jezebel, had her political ups-and-downs, but in 721 BC was overrun. Most of her people were deported and as a nation she perished from the face of the earth. The tattered remnants of her people who were left intermingled with the non-Jews and came to be known as the Samaritans. The Jews of the Southern Kingdom were to dispise them for centuries.

The Southern Kingdom itself survived for almost 150 years more, but finally in 587 BC Jerusalem fell and many of the people were carried off into captivity in Babylon to serve as a servant class. The people who had called themselves the People of God had come to an apparent untimely and abrupt end for the last vestige of the nation was no more. The writer of Psalm 137 speaks of those dreadful days when he writes, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion."

There in Babylon the years went by until only the older people could even remember Jerusalem. During those years the Babylon Empire that had crushed Judah and carried her people away began to deteriorate. As a military and political power, Babylon is coming apart at the seams. Already a brilliant military genius named Cyrus has brought Asia Minor to heel and controls an empire stretching from the Aegean Sea (modern Turkey) to the Persian Gulf (modern Iran). Now he turns his attention to the Babylonian empire which begins to crumble before him. His great armies smash the Babylonian resistance until finally the land is his.

Cyrus turns out to be a benevolent ruler. He permits the Jews to return to their homeland, but what difference will it make? They are finished as a powerful nation. Jerusalem had been destroyed fifty years before and put to the torch. Only a small handful of people are left who are willing to go back home and begin the long, tedious, impossible task of rebuilding. Never again--except for a brief period under the Macabees 300 years later--would they know political independence. The pitiful remnant would go back to lands that had been laid waste, to cities burned and destroyed, to a temple that had been torn to the ground until not a stone stood upon another.

It is in this context that our scripture for this morning is written. There we read, "A voice cries: 'in the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh, make

straight in the desert a highway for our God." Yes, the Jews are going home. There isn't much to go back to, but their time of punishment is over. Now God will begin to build again from the remnant a new people of God.

The first lesson I would like to draw this morning is this: When God's people are disobedient, Babylon is always the result. Time and time again across the centuries God's prophets had warned Israel that her sin and her disobedience would bring God's judgment upon her. Israel was in Babylon because she had turned from God and had deserted her faith.

I see a parallel in the church today. There are those who are telling us that the Church is declining, that she is irrelevant, that she is not communicating the faith. This may be true. I do know that in Europe the Church had declined radically and that in England the great cathedrals are almost empty. If the church is in a Babylonian captivity today it is because she has turned from God and deserted her faith. It is because we have gotten away from fundamental biblical truths and made the Christ of the New Testament a pale and anemic human figure who has been stripped and divested of his divinity. In the process we have brought upon ourselves the wrath and judgment of God. If the Church today is suffering from a Babylonian captivity it is because we have abandoned the clear-cut and unequivocal moral commandments of God. If the Church today is languishing helplessly it is because she has listened to theological prostitutes telling her that Her Lord is dead. If the bugle call to God's people has an uncertain sound it is because the Church has confused politics, social revolution, and secularism with her real task of proclaiming the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. If the church is in bondage it is because she has forgotten that she cannot change the world until she changes the hearts of men.

If the Church today has been overrun by her enemies it is because she has yearned and desired for the acceptance of men--even as Israel wanted to be like the other nations--quite forgetting that God called us to be an uncompromising rock of offense and a stone of stumbling, unashamed of the cross of Jesus Christ. If our message to the world has lost the sharpness of its cutting edge it is because unlike St. Paul we can no longer cry out, "I know whom I have believed."

Some of us individually are experiencing captivity, too. We are captive to our selfish wants and desires; we are prisoners of our own anxieties and fears; we are the victims of broken human relationships--of hate and jealousy and misunderstanding and vindictiveness. Too many of us live in a Babylonian captivity to the superficial sophistication of our day that sneer at committed people as religious fanatics, who scorn any show of religious emotion, who degrade any personal religious experience as being simply a psychological malfunction, and who are more concerned about what friends and neighbors will think of us than we are concerned about what God will think of us.

Yes, Israel was in Babylonian captivity because she had turned from God and had deserted her faith. If the Church--and if we as individuals--suffer such a fate this morning, it is for the same reason. The second lesson I would like to

draw this morning is this: God can't lead us out of Babylon until we realize we can't lead ourselves.

When Judah leaned on her own armies, on her own wisdom, on her own resources, she couldn't lean on God. As long as she trusted in political pacts, on soldiers, on fortified cities, she could not trust in God alone. Judah had to hit the gutter before God could help her. Only when she was in captivity, only when she was destitute, only when she recognized her own helplessness--only then could God lead her out of Babylon.

There is a parallel in the church today. God cannot lead the church out of the Babylon she finds herself in today when she is trusting other things. The Church is leaning on new theological interpretations, we are leaning on ecumenical schemes of union, we are leaning on restructuring and organizational tinkering. Yes, we are trusting in the genius and wisdom of men and the Church is not leaning on the promises of God. It may be that the institutional church may have to hit the gutter before she will lean on God. It may be that our own beloved denomination may have to crack and tear and split apart before some remnant is left that will lean on God and be the instrument of his restoration. It hurts to think about it, but it may be a lesson we will have to learn the hard way.

Some of us personally this morning are not truly trusting God in our own lives. Some times God has to drive us to the wall, leaving us helpless and destitute before we turn to him. The British Navy has a strange custom. If there is a sudden disaster aboard ship, they blow what is called "the still." This is a certain whistle which calls the crew to a moment of silence in a time of crisis. Such a moment of calm in time of crisis has helped to avert many a catastrophe. Jesus believed in sounding the still when things looked tough. Time and time again he drew himself apart from the burden of his work to pray--to remember whom he trusted and whom he leaned upon.

When I was a child we used to sing an old hymn at revival meetings, "Leaning on The Everlasting Arm." It is only when we are leaning on Jesus, trusting him only, that God can set us free and lead us out of our own special Babylon.

The third lesson I would draw is this: God is still at work in his world. Israel was captive in Babylon, a devastated, pitiful remnant, far from home in a strange and foreign land, their own nation a rubbish heap of ruins. Yet it was precisely then that Isaiah wrote, "A voice cries, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" That is to say, "You are in the wilderness, but God is coming through here." Surely this is why the New Testament writers picked up Isaiah and applied what he said to Jesus. It was saying, "The world is in a wilderness, a Babylonian captivity, lost, cut off, but God is building a freeway through here. That Freeway is Jesus."

The Advent season is a time when we look forward to the coming of Jesus. Today is the first of the four Sundays before his birth that we call the Advent season. To the ancient Jews, the Prophet Isaiah cried, "God is going to build a

freeway so you can get out of Babylon." That road out of Babylon is open to the Church today. That road out of Babylon is open to you this morning. That road is the man who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." That road is Jesus. That is the only hope the church today has. That is the only hope you have.

When the Jews were in Babylonian captivity, God gave them a road out. Are you a captive to sin and death? Are you a captive to some evil desire, to some wicked sin? Are you prisoner to a life that has no meaning, no direction? Listen, God has a way out, an escape route, for you! Jesus is God's way out of bondage. Jesus is God's way out of captivity. Jesus is God's way out of exile.

You know, one way or another, all of us are traveling down some road this morning. What road are you on this morning--are you on God's road?