

Sermon for Sunday, December 21, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GOD'S BIG INTERSTATE"

Text: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way to the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

--Isaiah 40:1-11

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 several hundred years before under the leadership of Joshua, looking for a place to call their own. But after King Solomon, things had not gone so well and the nation split. The Northern Kingdom, under such rulers as Ahab and Jezebel, had its political ups and downs, but in 721 B.C. 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 since the area was then known as Samaria, they were called Samaritans. The Jews of the Southern Kingdom were to despise them for centuries.

The Southern Kingdom itself survived for almost 150 years more, but finally in 587 B.C., Jerusalem fell and many of the people were carried off into captivity in Babylon to serve as a servant and artisan 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 the glory that had once been Jerusalem. But, as those years passed, the Babylon Empire that had crushed Judah and carried her people away began to deteriorate herself. As a military and political power, Babylon was coming apart at the seams. Already a brilliant military genius named Cyrus had brought Asia Minor to heel and controlled an empire stretching from the Aegean Sea (modern Turkey) to the Persian Gulf (modern Iran). Then he turned his attention to the Babylonian empire which began to crumble before him. His great armies smashed the Babylonian resistance and quickly the land was his.

Cyrus turned out to be a benevolent ruler. History indicates he was one of the greatest rulers of ancient times. He permitted the Jews to return to their homeland, but what difference would it make? They were finished as a powerful nation. The young people know nothing of their ancient homeland and did not want to return. Jerusalem itself had been destroyed and put to the torch 50 years before. Only a small handful of people are left who are even 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 down until not a stone stood upon another, to a land where the few inhabitants living there would oppose their return.

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 the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" Yes, at long last, 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 this tragic little remnant a new people of God.

The first lesson I would like to draw for us 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--in God's people today. The Church in many places is losing members, her resources are declining, her financial fortunes are in disarray. In our own denomination, people generally have lost confidence in our leadership, income has dropped dramatically, we are bringing missionaries home for lack of funds when peoples are crying out for help. Already a group has pulled out of our denomination and started a splinter group. And why have these things happened to us? 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, stripped and divested of His divinity. In the process, we have brought upon our denomination the judgment and wrath of God who cannot and will not bless a people who turn from Him. The Babylonian captivity comes when the church abandons clear-cut and unequivocal moral commandments of God and instead practices and supports things contrary to His laws. The church has listened to theological prostitutes telling her that her Lord is dead, that she must be relevant to a sinful world and by that they mean she must embrace the ways of the world. In the process, the Church has confused politics, social revolution, and secularism with her real task of sharing with a lost world that at Christmas Jesus came to die for our sins and that the world will never be changed until Jesus changes the hearts of men of the world.

And some of us here this morning are in Babylon, too. We are ourselves captives. We are captive to selfish wants and desires; we are prisoners of our own anxieties and fears; we are the originators of broken relationships, of hate and jealousy and pride and racism and bigotry. As a consequence, we are in some spiritual Babylon. Others of us are captive to the superficial sophistication of our day--we scorn religious emotion, degrade any personal religious experience as a psychological malfunction and are more concerned about what others will think of us than we are of what God will think of us.

Yes, Israel was in Babylonian captivity because she had turned from God and had deserted her faith. The consequence was the judgment and wrath of God. And if the Church--and if we, as individuals--suffer some lonely spiritual captivity this morning, it is likely for the same reason. Rebellion against God, turning from God, always spells Babylon.

The second lesson I would like to draw from our Scripture this morning is this: God can't lead us out of captivity until we realize we can't free ourselves, until we realize we can't find our own way out. When Judah, the Southern Kingdom, leaned on her own armies, on her own resources, she couldn't lean on God. As long as she trusted in political pacts, on soldiers, on fortified cities, on military alliances, 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, stripped of all other resources, could she recognize her own helplessness--and only then could God begin to lead her out of Babylon.

There are parallels among God's people today. The Church is suffering because she has trusted other things. She has put her trust in new theological interpretations, in biblical fadism. She is leaning on ecumenical schemes of union, she is leaning on restructuring and reorganizational tinkering. Yes, we are trusting in the genius and wisdom of men and the Church is not leaning on the great promises

of God. It now appears highly likely that many of the so-called mainline denominations will have to hit the gutter before they 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 trust Him to be the instrument of our restoration. It tears my heart to think of it, but we may have to learn the hard way.

Are we all trusting God and leaning on Him this morning? Sometimes God has to drive us to the wall, leaving us helpless and broken and defeated before we turn to Him. Let me ask you this morning, on what and on whom are you leaning? What or whom are you depending on, putting your trust in? If it is anything less than total surrender, complete reliance on Jesus, then you are in terrible danger. Back when I was a child there used to be an old hymn we sang--some of you may remember it. It was called, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arm". It is only when we are leaning on Jesus, trusting Him only, that God can free us from things that bind us and lead us out of some of our own personal hells, our own personal Babylons. 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 always sounded the still when things looked tough. Time and time again in the midst of crisis He drew Himself apart from the burden of His work to pray--to remember, to remind Himself whom He trusted and whom He leaned on. In the midst of our busy lives as we rush here and there, leaning on our own resources, our own ingenuity and our own skills, we need to sound the still, to pause and remember whose we are and who we can really trust and lean upon.

The third lesson on this last Sunday before Christmas that I would draw from our Scripture is this: God is still at work in His world. From the standpoint of the Jews there in Babylonian captivity, things looked hopeless. They were prisoners in a foreign land, a pitiful remnant far from a homeland that was itself devastated, a rubbish heap of ruins. They had no leadership, no money, no resources and nothing to go back to. They must have felt that God was helpless in the face of such conditions. Yet, it was precisely then that Isaiah wrote, "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" That is to say, "You are in a desert wilderness, but God is not through. God is coming through here with a big interstate. God is going to bring you out."

Listen, could the world be in a worse wilderness today? When you read the morning papers do you get the feeling you are in some desert of despair? Well, that's why the New Testament writers picked up what Isaiah said and applied it to Jesus. They are saying, "The world is in a wilderness, a Babylon captivity, lost, cut off, but God is at work in this world." They are saying, "God's building a big interstate out of the desert. Jesus is coming." And maybe that's something of what Jesus meant when He said, "I am the way..."

I want to say to you this morning that the world doesn't have the last word. Sin doesn't have the final say. No, God is still at work. Christmas is God saying, "I'm building a big interstate for you. I'm giving you a road out." The church today needs to be on God's big interstate. I'm praying for the Church that it will get on God's road. God's road leads to renewal, to restoration.

And how about you? Are you the prisoner of some sin in your life? Are you the hapless captive of some evil desire? Are you the victim of some vile habit? Is there some lack of integrity, some brokenness of character that you suffer from? Well, Christmas is God's word to you. It is His word that He is at work in the world to do something about captivity and He can do something about the Babylon in your life. You don't have to stay in bondage, you don't have to live in the wilderness of the desert. No, God is building a big interstate. It is called "The Way"---some people call Him Jesus.

One way or the other---willy-nilly---all of us are traveling down some road this mornin'. I guess the big question is this: What road are you on? Are you on God's big interstate?

Complete reliance on Jesus, then you are in terrible danger. I was a child there used to be an old hymn we sang--some of you may remember it--"Jesus, I'm leaning on the Everlasting Arm." It is only when we are leaning on Jesus, trusting Him only, that God can free us from things that bind us and lead us out of a land of our own personal hells, our own personal Babels. The British Navy has a strange custom. If there is a sudden disaster about ship, they blow what is called "the still". This is a certain whistle which calls the crew to a moment of silence. Such a moment of calm in time of crisis has helped to avert many a catastrophe. Jesus always sounded the still when things looked tough. And time again in the midst of crisis he drew himself apart from the burden of his work to pray--to remember, to remind himself when he trusted and when he leaned on. In the midst of our busy lives we rush here and there, leaning on our own resources, our own ingenuity and our own skills, we need to sound the still, to pause and remember where we are and who we are leaning on.

Let's find lesson on this from the Bible. I would give you one. It is this: God is still at work in his world. From the beginning of the world there in Babylonian captivity, things looked hopeless. They were prisoners of a foreign land, a pitiful remnant far from a homeland that was itself devastated. A rubbish heap of ruins. They had no leadership, no money, no resources and nothing to go back to. They must have felt that God was helpless in the face of such opposition. Yet, it was precisely then that Isaiah wrote, "A voice cried: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" That is to say, "You are in a desert wilderness, but God is not through. He is coming through here with a big interstate. God is going to bring you out."

Listen, could the world be in a worse wilderness today? When you read the morning papers do you get the feeling you are in some desert of despair? Well, that's why the New Testament writers looked at what happened and applied it to Jesus. They were saying, "The world is in a wilderness, it is a desert, lost, cut off, but God is at work in this world." They were saying, "Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming out of the desert. Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming."

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