

The Redeemed on the Highway of Holiness
Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:1-11
Responsive Reading: Psalm 146

Sam worked one summer with a road construction company. His first job was to keep a record of what went into the base of road. You have probably noticed that roads need to be built up, so water runs off, snow blows over it, and it has to have a good base so they can hold up heavy vehicles, plus last a long time.

It quickly became clear the contractor was not putting in the right materials or as many inches in a layer as was expected. Sam reported to his boss, who quickly reassigned Sam to office work. Sam always wondered, how long did the road last before repairs were needed?

What do engineers know about **requirements for a good road**? What does a highway of holiness require for the redeemed to travel?

There are quite a few **verses about highways** in the Holy Bible. It's a word picture to help us understand biblical truths. Isaiah 33:8 informs us, "The highways are desolate, the traveler has ceased, He has broken the covenant, he has despised the cities, He has no regard for people This tells us that not everyone gets on the road.

Isaiah 11:16 gives us a history lesson. "There will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant of His people who will be left. Just as there was for Israel in the day they came up out of the land of Egypt." Just as God rescued Israel from Egypt, so he promised to bring the exiles home from Assyria. God sending Jesus is another promised rescue attempt for the Creation.

And we know this theme of the Almighty reaching out and making a way of salvation, from Isaiah 40:3-4. "A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD Jesus in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley." God makes the way.

This highway rescuing God reaching out to us theme is carried on into the New Testament. In Mark 1:2-4, we find John the Baptist declaring, "Behold, I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, so people could get ready for Jesus, and get on His highway of living.

The Bible **talks about holiness a lot**. We are encouraged, "But just as your Creator who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." (Hebrews 12:14)

And naturally **purity ties in with holiness**. "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of greed or impurity, because these are improper for God's holy people." Ephesians 5:3

So what does Isaiah and the Almighty mean when they say, "And a highway will be there: it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way"?

It means God builds a highway, to rescue us, to lead us out of trouble and danger. We could say the base of the highway is Jesus Christ and the values the Bible teaches. Those who walk on it, are called out to follow the baby Jesus.

Plus the highway is a witness to all. The word highway means exactly what it says. It's high. This holy highway is a road built on a raised causeway, making it visible and unmistakable to everyone even at a far distance. The church is visible on this elevated Way called holiness.

What does the Bible mean by **walk on that Way**? It's an expression used figuratively in the Bible to refer to a way of acting and living that is approved by Yahweh. "The term, Way, was one definition the early believers used to describe themselves. The first followers of Jesus Christ were spoken of as belonging to "The Way." They kept a way of life centered

on faith in Jesus Christ, following his example. And we trust as Proverbs (12:28) tells us, "In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. Plus Jesus says to us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) So the Highway of Holiness is the way God provides for us to walk to have salvation.

How important is this idea of holiness? R. C. Sproul, in his book "The Holiness of God," reminds us: "Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, or justice, justice, justice. Our Creator is all those things. But over and over we read the cry of the angels, Holy, Holy, Holy! Almighty's glory!"

Hebrew writers repeat words for emphasis or to show degrees of comparison. For example, the familiar verse from Isaiah 26:3 reads: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." In translating this, instead of using perfect peace, it's literally, shalom, shalom, or peace peace. So the triplicate "Holy" signifies God is "really holy" and that this is important for us to grasp.

Another view on how **important the concept of holiness** is, comes from theologians who believe that holiness is God's central quality. It's who the Creator's is. Evangelist Billy Graham wrote, "As I read the Bible, I seem to find holiness to be God's supreme attribute."

Louis Berkhof in his theology book shares: "It does not seem proper to speak of one attribute of God as being more central & fundamental than another; but if this were permissible, the scriptural emphasis on the holiness of God would seem to justify its selection."

Pastor James Montgomery Boice asked a discipleship group to list God's qualities in order of importance. They put love first, followed by wisdom, power, mercy, omniscience, and truth. At the end of the list they put holiness. "That did surprise me," Boice wrote, "because the Bible refers to God's holiness more than any other attribute."

In talking about this sermon, Rose shared this insight. **Holiness is objectivity.** This world needs objectivity with the ability we have to spin, take partial truths and make them sound true, to confuse, blame and to outright lie. But holiness is objectivity. Our Creator loves everyone - equally. But the Almighty doesn't like what we often do - which is sin.

An earthly example of this is a man who was respected by everyone in his congregation. He was a life long lay leader. I quickly learned to go to him to check out facts. He had this amazing capacity to share about people on one side of the conflict, for which I was there for, and then the other side. - without being mean.

He was descriptive. When he offered his own opinion - at my urging, it was clearly an opinion - not part of the "facts." He was an immense help in sorting out the history between families as well as the conflict. He clearly cared for all the people and the church!

In today's terms we would call him **self differentiated.** Differentiation of self is the ability to separate feelings and thoughts. Undifferentiated people cannot separate feelings and thoughts. When asked to think, they are flooded with feelings, and have difficulty thinking logically and basing their responses on that.

Another way to understand how important holiness is - is to look at how God's people are described. The definition of who followers of Jesus are, you and I, can be summarized by three words, **God's Holy People.** When we turn over our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ, we are endorsing the holiness of God and

committing ourselves to emulate His holiness in our own lives. We are "God's Holy People." This sets a high standard for you and I as we walk on our Creator's high holy highway.

What is holiness? The Hebrew word for **holiness** is **Kadesh**, which means something which is cut off, separate or set apart. It describes that which is anti-secular, not of this world. Holiness is in a category all its own. Kadesh describes something that is elevated out of the sphere of what is ordinary.

The first time the word "**holy**" occurs in the Bible is in Exodus 3:5 when Moses turns aside to see the burning bush in the desert. A voice thundering from the bush said: "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." So holy also means sacred, super special and it's a characteristic of Holy Yahweh God.

The New Testament Greek word **hagios** also means set apart, separate and is in a class by itself. It is logical that for followers of Jesus, the call to be holy, to be pure, is a call to be separated from common use and set apart, or reserved, for special use. In both Old and New Testaments the term is applied to things, persons, and pre-eminently to God Almighty.

A beautiful illustration of the inherent idea of separation that is found in the word **holiness** comes from the world of nature. In the forests of northern Europe and Asia, lives little animal called the **ermine**, known for their snow-white fur in winter. They instinctively protect their white coats against anything that would soil it. Fur hunters take advantage of this unusual trait.

They don't set a snare to catch ermine, but instead they find the home, which is usually a cleft in a rock or a hollow in an old tree. They smear the entrance and interior with grime. Then the hunters set their dogs loose to find and chase the ermine. The frightened animal flees toward home but doesn't enter because of the filth. Rather than soil their white coat, they are trapped by the dogs and captured while

preserving their purity. For the ermine, purity is more precious than life. As it should be for us. It is what we are called to be.

Advent emphasizes how a pure holy God, chose to send his Son, to a sinful creation. This is a continuation of the Creator's commitment to have relationship with his creatures. But since the Almighty is holy, a way, a road, a set of values have to be given to us to help us find our way into salvation. Just as roads have building codes, and laws as to who can travel on them, so does the Highway of Holiness. Isaiah says, "Only the redeemed will walk there, & those the Lord has rescued will return"

I think we have knowledge of what holiness is not. And we have a sense of what keeps us from being holy as God is holy. But it's also important to know, we will not gain holiness by **standing still**. Nobody ever grew holy without consenting, desiring, and agonizing to be holy. Sin will grow without sowing, but **holiness needs cultivation**. Follow it; it will not run after us. We must pursue it with determination, eagerness, & perseverance, as a hunter pursues their prey. We have to get up on the highway.

And to become holy like God is holy – there is a list of do's and don'ts. But these don't make us holy! We can't go grab holiness like we grab a pizza or a school degree or even a positive trait like patience. We do need to get on the Way, so holiness begins to infiltrate our lives as we are open to the Holy Spirit and follow the Way and get on that Highway. We need the rules to find holiness, but holy scripture is clear, following the rules does not make us automatically holy like God is holy.

Steven Curtis Chapman has a song titled, Change, and here are the lyrics. "Well I got myself a t shirt that says what I believe. I got letters on my bracelet to serve as my ID. I got the necklace and the key chain. And almost everything a good Christian needs, yeah. I got the little Bible magnets on my refrigerator door. And a welcome mat to bless you before you

walk across my floor. I got a Jesus bumper sticker. The outline of a fish stuck on my car.

“And even though this stuff’s all well and good, yeah. I cannot help but ask myself: What about the change? What about the difference? What about the grace? What about forgiveness? What about a life that’s showing? I’m undergoing the change yeah, I’m undergoing the change.

“Well I’ve got this way of thinking that comes so naturally. Where I believe the whole world is revolving around me. And I got this way of living that I have to die to every single day, ‘cause if God’s Spirit lives inside of me yeah - I’m gonna live life differently, I’m gonna have the change, I’m gonna have the difference, I’m gonna have the grace, I’m gonna have forgiveness, I’m gonna live a life that’s showing, I’m undergoing the change.”

John Charles Ryle, Anglican bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century speaks of holiness. “He says, “It is not knowledge...nor great profession...nor doing many things...nor zeal for certain matters in religion...” He continues that holiness is not “morality and outward respectability of conduct, nor taking pleasure in hearing preachers, nor keeping company with godly people. These things alone are not holiness. A person may have any one of them, and yet never see the Lord.”

We don’t become holy by what we do, think and say. Ultimately, holiness is a gift from a Holy God. It comes on us as we live the Creator’s Way and commit to walking on the Almighty’s Highway. It comes into us by what we do, think, say and believe. It’s a paradox.

It’s important to reflect how little we know about the divine, the things of God. The little we do know will prompt us, to be cautious, in our thinking and actions and words. The things of God are not what we want or imagine them to be. God Himself determines what they are, and God has not the slightest concern for our own interpretations of holiness.

Also, Holiness is not dependent on our recognition of it. It resembles electricity in this respect. The person who is electrocuted when climbing up on a high voltage tower perishes without regard to their own understanding of what they are about, or their innocent intentions, or their personal theories concerning electricity.

I think a reason we don’t focus so much on holiness, why it does not get its proper attention, is because there are no 12 simple steps to Holiness that we control. Instead, Holiness requires self-denial. Holiness requires sacrifice. Holiness requires submission to Jesus even unto death. Holiness comes as we work at trying to be like the little baby. But the good news is that even as God raised Jesus from the dead, so shall he raise you.

Advent keeps presenting us with other worldly, outlandish visions of what our world can be and is supposed to be. I don’t think it’s an accident that we have these provocative scriptures each year about what God’s Highway is like.

In our reading from **James**, the brothers and sisters are urged to be patient – even in suffering, just like “the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.” And James points to the holy patience and determination of the prophets, to proclaim the way of the highway, as we wait, hope, pray and live.

In our **Matthew** reading, John the Baptist was discouraged and wondering if Jesus was really the way. Jesus’ answers reflect what Isaiah tells us – “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf ear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ‘Blessed anyone who does not stumble on account of me.’” Like John we need assurance of who Jesus is.

This baby and the Advent messages is what the highway looks like. How the glory of the Holy Lord stands out. This is our Creator’s dream for this earth. It’s why we were made in the

first place. And it's why we need this holy advent baby. It's why the Lord Jesus Christ becomes the center of our existence.

May "Holiness adorns Your house, O Lord, forever," (Psalm 93:5). Holiness should be at the heart of God's people.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, God has not called us to uncleanness, but holiness. (I Thess. 4:7)

And the writer of Hebrews urges us, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." (12:14)

"But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:15-16)

So may we be the redeemed, walking on the highway of holiness.