

“God’s Ever Expanding Superhighway”

Malachi 3:1-7, Phil. 1:2-11, Luke 3:1-17, Dec 6, 2015

What if I were to give each of you an assignment to go home and design your own Christmas card, with a Biblical theme of course? What illustration would you choose to place on the front of your card? -- Well, you might choose a picture of the Baby Jesus lying in the manger with his Mother Mary and Joseph standing close by! Or you might capture that glorious angel announcing to the shepherds: *“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord!”* (Luke 2:11)

Or you might capture the glorious appearance of that angel giving that unbelievable announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:10-11.)

But what if I were to ask the Prophet Malachi to go home and to design his own Christmas card, as a man who lived some 400 years before our Savior’s birth? I could see Malachi illustrating the front of his Christmas card with the portrait of a very strong and vital Man coming among us with a box of his favorite, high-powered laundry detergent under his left arm and a bottle of bleach in his right hand—because this is the type of Messiah Malachi was expecting.

In the Old Testament lesson today, Malachi foresees the One who will come among us as One who comes among us armed with “fuller’s soap;” that is with a box of laundry detergent especially known for its ability to eradicate grime and tough stains from soiled garments—something like that ever-popular brand of “20 Mule Team Borax” or “Oxy-Clean” today! While Malachi’s portrayal of the coming Savior might seem a little bit bizarre to us, it’s actually a very fitting depiction when it speaks to us of the Messiah’s role to come among us and launder our lives—by purifying us from our sin, and by giving us a second birth into the kingdom of God, restoring us to much higher degree of God’s own usefulness again?

And how was God going to make it possible for us to come back to him? “All of us who like sheep had gone astray, and turned each one of us our own way—away from the God who created us?”

God himself was going to construct an ever-expanding superhighway—through the powerful preaching ministry of one who would enter this world as the forerunner of Christ. And all four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell us that this prophecy was fulfilled in the life and ministry of John the Baptist: *“Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts”* (Malachi 3:1)!

Preparing a superhighway is no small undertaking. And it certainly was no small undertaking that President Eisenhower signed into law among us in our nation way back on June 29, 1956 when he signed what we now remember as: “The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways Act,” paving the way for some 41,000 miles of Interstate Highways to be constructed, with the hopes of making transcontinental travel across North America far safer and more efficient than it had ever before. Do you know that since that time, there have now been built some 48,000 miles of Interstate Highways throughout the United States of America? At that time there were only some 67 million cars and trucks upon American road, but today that number has increased by some 400%, with some 268 million motor vehicles on our roads in 2015!

But please remember: In the construction of our Interstate Highway system there had to be thousands of valleys that were filled in and thousands of mountains and hills made low! There had to be thousands of bridges that were erected and thousands of tunnels that were dug! And there had to be thousands of crooked places that became straight and thousands of rough places that were made smooth!”

And yet, as large of an undertaking as the construction of our great Interstate Highway System has been here in the United States these past 60, it really pales in comparison to God's Ever Expanding Superhighway that he has built and is continuing to build throughout the world in the ongoing proclamation of the good news of his everlasting love for us in the gift of his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

In our Gospel lesson (Luke 3:1-14) St. Luke also reminds us that the ministry of John the Baptist, as foretold by the Prophet Malachi, was also prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah some 600 years before our Savior was born. Isaiah tells us that John came in fulfillment of that prophecy about a mysterious Voice speaking in the wilderness! Luke writes: *"The Word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region and around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:*

*Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight!
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low!
And the crooked places shall become straight,
And the rough places shall become level ways,
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God!*

The FIRST TIME these verses in the Bible are given to us in the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet was speaking these words to the children of Israel who were being held captives as political exiles in Babylon. This particular "sermon" was first preached to the Jewish people in the Babylonian exile around 540 BC. At this time, the exile had lasted nearly 50 years and King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon had died, and Cyrus the King of Persia was on a march with his armies towards Babylon.

Isaiah believed that Cyrus would defeat the Babylonian army, which he did, even without one battle ever having been fought, so that Cyrus would then choose to release the Jewish people to return to their homeland in Palestine once more, which Cyrus also did!

This is when Isaiah used the metaphor of a "HIGHWAY BEING BUILT" through the wilderness. The road home would be wide and smooth, metaphorically speaking, without hills or mountains or valleys. In other words, all the barriers that stood between the Hebrew people and Jerusalem would be removed. Not only would God's people be restored to their homeland once more, this journey home would bear witness to the fact that the LORD God, the God of Israel, is a God of salvation! This return to Zion would be the vindication of their God and of God's people!

In our Gospel lesson today, John the Baptist paraphrases these verses from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, when he is calling all the people throughout Judea, in all of the surrounding towns and villages, to come and personally repent of their sins and to also receive for themselves the forgiving grace of God—through his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins!

Repentance, of course, is often a misunderstood word in our day. Some people believe that "repentance" is simply the acknowledgement that you and I have offended the Holy God who created us, by transgressing his holy commandments that he has given us, commanding us to do certain things, and forbidding us totally from doing other things. But the word in Greek "metanoia" means to have a change of mind, and to turn around and head back toward God rather than further away from him all the time.

Yes, to some degree, repentance involves "being sorry" for the needless pain we have brought to ourselves and others around us, including those people whom we actually claim to love, but repentance is very much also about believing that what the Bible tells us is true! God freely forgives those who are willing to acknowledge their sins and find God's forgiveness and grace available to them through the perfect life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

And doesn't this world need God's ever expanding superhighway; especially in a world where there was another terrible terrorists' act of destruction and demolition that took place in Paris on

November 14 in which 129 people died and 352 more were injured! The citizens of France sought many different ways to express their profound sympathy to their fellow citizens who had suffered great losses in that senseless attack, but one of the best tributes of bereavement was achieved when for the first time, as far back as anyone can remember, the Eiffel tower remained dark the following night as a sign of national mourning!

Doesn't the world need God's ever expanding superhighway; especially in a world where 14 people were again innocently slaughtered in cold blood this past Wednesday in San Bernardino, California, and 17 more were seriously injured?

The Season of Advent is a season of repentance in the life of Christ's Holy Church throughout the world in this month of December. It is a time to recognize that much of the pain we have experienced in this life is pain that we have brought upon ourselves through our disobedience and that others have brought upon us through their disobedience too. It is a time for us look to the cross and see the Son of God sacrificing his innocent life for us on the cross, the One who was wounded for transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53).

Didn't Jesus say on the night before he died, that he himself was the very embodiment of God's ever expanding superhighway, by which he would seek to bring us back from that extremely lost position of our being away from our God because of our sins into a fully restored and right relationship with him again? Jesus said, *"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life and no one comes to Father except through me!"* (John 14:6) And in just a few moments later Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for us, so that where he was going, we might eventually come!

I believe that when most people hear these words they immediately think of heaven, because Jesus ascended once again to his proper place in glory at the Father's right hand 40 days after he rose victoriously from the dead that first Easter morning—and that one day he will take us to heaven to live with him there too! But before Jesus could go to heaven and make it possible for us to go with him there one day, he first of all had to go to the cross to suffer and die in our stead. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes: *"God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin so that though him we might become the righteousness of God!"* Well with the remaining time that we have left I want to share with you what I believe might be the deep, personal implications, of these Scriptures lessons that you and I were privileged to hear read out loud to us in this House of Worship again today! Malachi says that when the Promised Savior would arrive that not all people would necessarily be able to endure the day of his coming; and here he is talking about those people who remain unrepentant concerning their sins and have never asked God for his forgiveness or asked any other person for their forgiveness either! -- But not only would the Promised Savior come with fuller's soap, Malachi teaches us, that he will also come like a refiner's fire and like a refiner of silver!

I recently read about a woman's Bible study group that was taking a close look at these verses of our Old Testament lesson that became very intrigued with what Malachi has to say here. Fortunately, they were living in Virginia City, Nevada, where silver is still mined in the United States today. One lady in that group said she knew of one particular artist, a silversmith, who had a small business in which he still made personal items for sale out of silver today. She decided to visit his shop and watch him in action. And there she noticed that he took a rather large piece of silver, 4 inches long, and held it with a special tool over a very hot fire that was made for that purpose. The man explained to this woman that he held the piece of silver over the middle of the fire where the flames without a doubt were the absolute hottest. He did so that he might burn all the other metallic impurities away that might have still been attached to that piece of silver. But the whole time he did so, he kept his eyes firmly fixed on that piece of silver, lest he heat it up to too high of a temperature, and the silver itself become destroyed.

The woman asked the silversmith: "How can you know when it is time to remove the silver from the fire!" He replied, "The exact time is when I can see my own image (or reflection) in it!" That's when he removed the silver and shaped actually into a beautiful piece of jewelry that would reflect the craftsmanship of that silversmith in every way.

The Bible says that this is how our God uses the difficult times in our life to remake us constantly more and more into the own image of his beloved Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Though God is never the Author of any kind of suffering that would come to us in this, he uses these experiences to refine us into become shaped and reshaped more and more into this image of his Son. This is what Peter says in his first letter in the New Testament: *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes when it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him, and though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible, and filled with glory obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls!” (1 Peter 1:3-9).*

Along these same lines St. James says: *My brothers and sisters, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2-4).*

And we know that God works together everything for good to them that love him and are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28)!

The hymn writer says:

*When through fiery trials your pathway will lie,
My grace, all sufficient will be your supply!
The flames will not hurt you; I only design,
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine!*

But how willing are we really to share that same forgiveness and grace with others all around us, especially with those whom we have falsely imagined that their sins much be far more damning and detrimental than our own?

Do you also remember the Parable of the Prodigal Son; of the younger son who begged his father for his fair share of the family inheritance even before he died, because the situation for him at home was one he deemed to be far too stuffy and was real cramping his style! The father gave that boy the inheritance and the boy went out and foolishly spent it in loose living. He got a job slopping hogs; a very shameful form of employment for a good Jewish boy like him. He wished he could have eaten some of the pods he was feeding to those pigs, but it wasn't permissible. Finally he comes to his senses and prepares a speech to give to his father: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and earth and am no longer worthy to be treated as your son! Treat me as one of your hired hands!”*

But the Father, against all odds, sees that boy coming home when he is still a long ways off! He runs across the village and embraces his son! He demands that a feast be celebrated to welcome his lost son home; the killing of the fatted calf, with music and dancing.

His older son, however, was out working in the field and when he came home and discovered what was happening, he became absolutely incensed. We remember how the father pleads with the older son to join in on the great celebration. But Jesus leaves his parable open-ended. We aren't sure really whether the older son repented of his hard-heartedness and lack of compassion or not!

Here was this older brother, a man no doubt who took life very seriously, who did all of the things he was supposed to do to live responsibly in this world, but who had never really known for himself of the great love that his father had for him either. Too bad this man couldn't have heard those deeply meaningful words from I Cor. 13 that I read at Tim's and Shanna's wedding this past Friday afternoon. *“If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love I am only a noisy gong and clanking symbol. If I have all faith so as to speak to this mountain and cause it to move, but had not love, what good would it do?”*

Christmas is a time to really receive a fresh outpouring of God's great love upon you!

In just a few minutes from now we will be invited to share in a far greater supper; the LORD'S OWN SUPPER? Here we celebrate because Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And as we prepare to come to his Table, once again we will pray those words of our Savior, "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us!*" Will we really mean what we are saying to our gracious God in those moments, or not! It's only as we pray these words with the fullest intentions of actually acting upon them, under the direction of God's Holy Spirit, that we ourselves can ever fully know the joy of becoming a great part of God's Ever Expanding Superhighway ourselves! Amen