

Sermon for August 20, 2017 – VBS Sunday

Isaiah 40:1-5 (NIV84)

Theme: Making Tracks

- 1) *The LORD promised to help,*
- 2) *Preparing the way,*
- 3) *For us to receive him.*

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Hundreds of years ago, many people came from Europe to America to make a better life for themselves. At that time, many parts of our country were still wild. Pioneers and settlers went west – some crossing dry plains and deserts, others making their way through canyons and climbing mountains - to find a place they could call home.

Life was hard. Distance and geography cut these settlers off from bigger coastal cities. It was hard to get needed supplies. But, for many, the building of the railroad changed everything. Manufactured goods and supplies could reach them. The railroad made them feel more united and connected with the rest of the nation. In some cases, it even saved lives.

In our sermon text for today, God talks to a people that has wandered far from him and his grace? Who is this people? We are. And how have we wandered far from him? By sinning against his Law – the Ten Commandments.

Yes, ever since humanity's first parents (Adam and Eve) broke their relationship with God by doing the very thing he forbade them to do, the entire human race has been separated from God – living under the threat of his righteous judgment. But here's the thing: even though we all have sinned against God, the LORD does not want us lost to hell forever. No, he loves us so much that he took it upon himself to save us – reuniting us to himself, much like the railroads united far off settlers to the big coastal cities of our country.

With the prophet Isaiah as our guide, let us consider how God reunites himself to us through Christ, under the theme: **Making Tracks.** 1) *The LORD promised to help,* 2) *Preparing the way,* 3) *For us to receive him.*

Part One: The LORD promised to help.

Imagine for a moment that a judge has a son or daughter who breaks the law. Would it be right for that judge to simply wink at the misdeed and let his child go unpunished? No, that would make him unjust. What is true of a human judge is also true of God.

The LORD loves all people. Why? Because he created them. But here's the thing: we all have broken God's holy law – a law he instituted for His glory and our good. Being the holy, just God that he is, our LORD couldn't just wink at our sins and say: "Oh that's ok, I won't punish you for this." No, we needed to be dealt with. We needed to be punished.

Our sins have separated us from God. They are the reason there is so much sorrow, misery, hate and evil on this earth. They are the reason we fear death and the eternal punishment that comes after it.

But our loving LORD does not want us lost to hell. He loves us so much that he figured out a way to both forgive our sins and yet remain completely just. This is why he sent out preachers like the Old Testament prophet Isaiah with a special message. Listen to what he says:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Yes, the LORD has a special message for us. He doesn't want us to be like a scared animal, afraid that it will get hit. No, he loves us more dearly than anyone ever could. As a mother calls her hurt child to herself - wanting to console it – so the LORD calls out to us in all tenderness. He has figured out a way to pay for our sins without sending us to hell. He has found a way to allow us to live with him forever in paradise – just like he always intended. How? By paying for our sins himself. In the person of Jesus, he would take on human flesh and blood – perfectly keeping the law in our place. He would take our sins upon himself and suffer the full punishment they had earned. Yes, God himself would pay our debt by sending his one and only Son to live, die and rise again for our salvation. This is the message he wants us to know and believe. There is no reason to live and die apart from him.

Can you imagine someone promising to exchange your garbage for gold? Well, God did something even more mind boggling than that: in Christ, the LORD exchanged your sin for salvation.¹ God wants everyone to know this. Why? So that, by believing in him, we might personally receive the eternal life he won for us through Christ's cross.

Part Two: Preparing the way

Our sermon text continues: ³ *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.*

Imagine being a settler out west in early America – living on the wild frontier, facing cold winters with few supplies. Then you hear a rumor that a railroad is being planned. Trains will come from

major port cities, bringing food, medicine and supplies. What a blessing to have that connection! But making it happen would be a major undertaking. Just think of all the miles of track that would have to be laid – ground that would need to be leveled and bridges that would need to be erected! Living in the Rockies, it might seem impossible for such a connection to be built!

And yet the railroad companies worked hard to make that happen. Spending lots of money and labor they worked from the coasts – leveling ground, blasting through mountains and erecting impressive bridges over high canyons to run a railroad all the way through America!

But, as impressive as the rail connection across America is, it pales in comparison to what the LORD accomplishes in a believer's heart. Great mountains of selfishness and pride – as well as canyons of perverseness and sin – separate us from God. Left to ourselves, we could never overcome these obstacles. They are too great for us.

Thankfully the LORD comes with his power to help. He sends the Holy Spirit where his word is preached. He uses His Holy Law to blast through the mountains of pride and self-righteousness that tower in our hearts. His Ten commandments reveal the greed, lust, and idolatry that lies deep within us. The Holy Spirit uses God's law like a doctor uses a PET scan – showing us the cancerous sin inside of us which, if left unchecked, will kill us eternally.

But the LORD doesn't just stop at showing us his law. He goes on to tell us the good news of what Christ did to pay for our sins. And why does God do this? To get us to repent of all sin and self-reliance in order that He might enter our hearts with his mercy, love and salvation.

You see, God loves us more than we can ever imagine. Now, the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh try to convince us that the opposite is true: that God is just some mean judge preventing us from having fun. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Look: he spares no cost or effort to save us. Proof of this fact is seen in everything Jesus endured to win our salvation. Proof of this fact is also seen in how God sends out faithful pastors, evangelists and faithful Christian friends to speak his truth in love so that the Holy Spirit, working through their witness might break through the hardness of our hearts in order to awaken the faith we need to receive God's wonderful salvation. God himself and God alone lays the road from himself to us – all to the glory of his name.

Part Three: For us to receive him.

Isaiah writes: ⁵ *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

What is God's greatest glory? Is it his mighty power to create and destroy? Is it all the beauty and majesty of heaven? No, it is a defenseless baby born to a poor virgin, lying in a manger. Jesus is God's greatest glory. Why? Because he is the revelation of God's most wondrous, amazing love.

The Bible says: ⁷ *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.* ⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still*

sinners, Christ died for us. . . .¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!ⁱⁱ

Yes, God's greatest glory is the saving love he expressed to us in Christ – a love he wants the entire world to know about so that, repenting of their sins, they might receive both him and the salvation he offers by faith. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."ⁱⁱⁱ*

And this is where we, as a Church, come in. Who are we? Sinners who the LORD not only saved, but also called together and commissioned to share his message of salvation to this corner of the globe. We are God's railroad workers who, by faithfully confessing God's Word, are preparing the way for the LORD. We use God's law to break down all the mountains of pride and self-reliance that try to prevent people from receiving Christ. We use the good news of Christ's love to fill in the valleys of hurt and despair people feel over their sins so that they might receive Christ and the wonderful salvation he won for all.

Listen, the LORD is calling you in love. Turn to him in repentance and faith, and you will be forgiven. Not only that, he will send the Holy Spirit into your heart to mark you as his dearly loved child, whom he will watch over through life on this earth – delivering you safely home to himself in heaven. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21-6:1 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Romans 5:7-8,10 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ John 3:16 NIV84