

Pentecost 9, July 21, 2024
St. John Lutheran Church, Beaufort, MO
“Are we just travelers?”

One of the great ironies of history is that those who took Jesus to Calvary believed they were forcing him to his dead-end; in reality, Jesus had chosen to go to that place to address the needs of a world which had come to its dead-end. Author Ron Mehl writes about this place in terms of a drive he often takes to the east side of Portland, Oregon, over the Marquam Bridge: "On the upper deck of that two-decker freeway, you can catch a glimpse of an exit that drops off into empty space. When the bridge was built back in the mid-1960s, it was designed to accommodate an east-running freeway [which was to take travelers all the way to the heights of magnificent Mount Hood]." Mehl writes that on a clear day, from the top of that Marquam Bridge, "you can [still] see Mount Hood in all its beauty ... symmetrical, snow-capped ... glistening like a jewel in the distance. ... If you look carefully, you can see how the bridge was [originally] built to accommodate a freeway lane veering off to the southeast ... but the freeway was never built ... the plans for the highway scrapped." Mehl says you can see where the road was supposed to go. "It juts out just a bit from the bridge structure, then is cut off as though sliced by a giant knife." The entrance ramp "now goes nowhere—except into the [cold] waters of the Willamette [River] far below."

Reaching the dead end

In our readings today, there are several mentions of traveling...From Jeremiah *"You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. ³Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.*

And Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus, *"¹⁷And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...*

Both readings make us think of how we are travelers in this world, looking for where we should be and how we could and should get there. Maps and words and

asking for directions have been part of our travel. Yet, someday we wonder if we have even advanced one more step toward our goal.

Mehl's description of the exit ramp to nowhere provides a powerful image of where humanity finds itself on Good Friday. For many people God has become something like that mountain in Ron Mehl's story. He is little more than a name on an irrelevant roadside sign they've passed by so often that they hardly notice it or wonder why someone doesn't take it down. For others, God is a destination they hope to get to some day—but certainly not now, while they're hurrying to get somewhere else. For others still, God seems to be forever shrouded in the distant mists, utterly unknowable. Only now and then, at a moment of clear perception, some of us catch a glimpse of his glory.

Perhaps you are dented up, one of life's collisions, or choking on the highway fumes, and suddenly you look up and sense God in his towering, unchanging, glistening goodness. Or maybe you look at that little child or through the lens of a microscope or a telescope, and suddenly you find yourself weak-kneed before his exquisite genius and vast eternity. Or maybe you face the reality of your own failing body or will. You find yourself down in some valley that just gets deeper and darker. You say with the Psalmist: "I lift up my eyes to the hills; from whence cometh my help?" And in so doing you find a sense of grace, and you sense that it could come from God. You sense that God is great enough to help. You yearn to be close to him, but you can't seem to get there. The gulf is too wide, the distance is too great.

Made for the mountain

There was supposed to be a road. There was supposed to be a permanent way between here and there, between us and him. The Book of Genesis tells us that that was God's plan in the beginning. It was in the original design, but the Bible tells us that sin came along like a giant knife, slicing off the connection between here and there. Man was not meant to live in the valley. We were not made to see our children slaughtered in the wars that rage in our world today. We were not made to be enslaved to chemicals or the control of others. Man was meant to go higher than the top of his constructions. We were made for the mountain. We were made for the crystal clean snows, the pure air, the living water, the dazzling sunshine, the incredible adventure, and the stunning serenity of life with God. In our clearest moments, we know this. We try to reach for our destiny. We build religious systems. We create artwork. We

construct moral frameworks. We do charitable works. But corroded and corrupted by sin, even the very best of these things can't really close the gap. They can't span the distance. Our best efforts are not much more than rusted rebar stretching out from crumbling concrete into space—reaching for the place, the connection, the life for which we were made. So we sit in traffic, watching the sky get hazier, wistfully wishing that things could be different, but there stands this permanent sign like that one on the phantom eastbound exit from Marquam Bridge that says, "Dead End." You can't get there from here.

On the night in which Jesus was betrayed into the hands of those who would crucify him, he sat in the upper room of a Jerusalem building and said, in effect, to his disciples: "It's time for me to return to the place from which I came." The disciples knew he was not from here. His vision was too clear, his heart was too strong, his spiritual health and power in every way too great to be from this earthly city. Jesus had come from the great manor house on the mountain.

But now Jesus was going and they were—afraid that they would never see him again; afraid that they'd never catch a breath of the mountain air they'd experienced in his presence again; afraid that their journey would screech to a stop at that place at the crest of the hill where the cross-shaped sign that seemed to say "Dead End." Jesus had told them the Cross was coming and knowing that they were afraid, he spoke these words in [John 14](#): *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* In other words, Jesus said: I'm going to take you to the Mountain.

Making a way to the mountain

Jesus said, *"You know the way to the place where I am going."* The truth, of course, is that they had no real idea of how they'd ever get to where Jesus was going. Didn't Jesus understand that the highway from here to there did not exist? Did he not see that the sin and brokenness of humanity made it impossible for human beings to get to God? Couldn't he grasp that the world had gotten so polluted that people could hardly even see the outline of God anymore? So the patron saint of all us doubting disciples dared to voice what everyone else was probably thinking. Thomas said to Jesus, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"* Jesus then told

them the meaning of Good Friday. Jesus said: *You do know the way. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

If you and I could have been there on Good Friday and witnessed what was actually happening on the invisible spiritual plane, I believe we would weep, not for the agony of the Cross but for its glory. What occurred at the Cross was so colossal that even Scripture only speaks of it in analogies. Let me try to put in poetic terms the equivalent of what happened: As sinful men pounded nails through the flesh of Christ, Jesus transformed those spikes into spiritual steel bent to the task of building something for them...a road to heaven. As the blood poured from his wounds, grace transformed it into spiritual concrete flowing out across eternity. As the crowd spat curses from their lips aimed at hurting him further, Jesus rolled words of forgiveness from his lips, smoothing out and firming up what he was making to bless them. As his enemies rejoiced, saying, "We have finished him," Jesus whispered, "It is finished." In the cosmic darkness of that ninth hour, as Jesus "bowed his head and gave up his spirit," only angels and demons could see what the sacrifice of the Son had actually finished—the long-forgotten highway between our city and God's mountain, between here and there.

This is what happened on Good Friday: sin and Evil took two pieces of wood and tried to cross Christ out. Jesus turned that wood into a sign that still proclaims "Road Open—Cross Here." I know this statement bothers some people. It seems too particular. I can't tell you why God chose to open the entrance to that road in Jerusalem instead of Mecca, Calcutta, Beijing, or Portland. I just marvel that he opened the road at all and that anyone who wants to can travel it.

I know some people are bothered by all the blood. Why is a blood sacrifice required? Why would God sacrifice his Son? All I can say is that the construction of any road that could span the distance between any world would obviously be very costly, and only God himself is rich enough to pay that price.

Conclusion

It's an amazing love that meets us today. Come lay your traveling old self at the foot of this signpost. Let that old self die here. Know that the travel in this world will one day be the travel to heaven. Let the cleansing, forgiving, life-changing love of Jesus Christ fill you tonight and strengthen you on the road with him. If you've been on another road, let this be the beginning of a whole new journey. The one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life bids you come. He says, "Travel here...to me." Amen.

Based on concept from Dan Meyer is pastor of Christ Church.us, a nondenominational, multisite church with locations in Oak Brook and Lombard, Illinois