

Road Improvements

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Psalm 146; Jeremiah 6:13-21

I'm not sure any of you know this, but I grew up in the state of Michigan. Were any of you aware of that? I grew up in the wonderful state of Michigan and they say up there that there are two seasons in Michigan – winter and road construction. And it always kind of felt that way. Either you were plowing your way through the snow and ice, or you were plowing your way through the construction signs, detours and barrels. Some of that has come to mind for me over the last couple of years driving from one end of Bee Ridge Road east of 75 (where I live) to close to the other end where I work. It was a couple years ago when we learned that Bee Ridge Rd. east of 75 would be undergoing some “improvements”. The road would be widened, new lanes inserted and circles added. I had moved, mind you, from a state – New Jersey -- that was trying to do away with circles and now I am in a town that appears increasingly addicted to them. Nevertheless, the project began a couple years ago and is scheduled to be completed sometime this summer. And in the meanwhile the journey from where we live at the end of Bee Ridge to the interstate has been a little bit like driving a Grand Prix race course. But it's not been a big deal especially with the promise that it would be complete this summer. Imagine then the joy that filled my heart when we learned that Bee Ridge Road west of 75 and in front of our fair church would begin construction -- “improvements” -- that would last another year and a half. Sewage lines, pedestrian islands. Hallelujah. Grand Prix for another 18 months. Still all in all little cost to pay for what we hope will be a more effective and

efficient byway, highway, thruway from the east to the west. Effective, efficient – and because this is of supreme value in our time and culture – faster. Effective, efficient and faster. These are for us these days the signs of progress.

I'm still trying to figure out what they are doing up at the interchange at 75 and University Parkway. Lots of construction barrels and barricades there. Lanes going all sorts of ways. Diverging Diamonds creating new patterns of traffic. And it's there to make our ways more effective, efficient and fast. The signs of progress.

It may then feel quite strange to hear the prophet say to us, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’”

Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths. I confess to you this is not my inclination. The wider the highway and the higher the speed limit, the better the road is what I say. In Pennsylvania where I spent seventeen years of my life we had the Pennsylvania Turnpike, one of the first American superhighways. Most of it there to replace the much more slow scenic US Highway 40 – you know that slow road that passed through all that lush farmland, and crossed gently across the Appalachians and passed you through those Pennsylvania Dutch hometowns where the Amish buggies passed by. I have a friend who tells me that whenever he can give himself the chance and the better part of the day he hops on US 40 to cross the state instead of using the turnpike. There is just so much more there, he tells me. Oh, I say – but efficiency, effectiveness and speed – what about these, I ask.

Look and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies.

I travel back and forth to New Jersey every summer

“The modern path takes you somewhere, the ancient path keeps you somewhere.”

and that means Interstate 95 – lovely Interstate 95. The modern path, shall we call it. And Interstate 95 parallels what might be considered an ancient path. I speak of the Appalachian Trail. I have never step foot on the Appalachian Trail – though I have crossed over it a few times. I have read enough about the trail and talked to a few who have hiked it including some from this church – and what I've learned is that the ancient path and the modern path have very different purposes. One is there to get you somewhere – again, effectively, efficiently and quickly. To get you somewhere. The other is there to keep you somewhere. Bill Bryson in his great book, *A Walk in the Woods*, chronicles his attempt to hike as a novice the Appalachian Trail and he shares this revelation:

There is no point in hurrying because you are not actually going anywhere. However far or long you plod, you are always in the same place: in the woods. It's where you were yesterday, where you will be tomorrow. The woods is one boundless singularity ... Time ceases to have any meaning. When it is dark, you go to bed, and when it is light again you get up, and everything in between is just in between. It's quite wonderful, really.

The ancient path is one that does not take you somewhere it keeps you somewhere. And I suppose that is the opportunity we give ourselves when we stand at the crossroads and look to the book found smack dab in the middle of the Bible – the book of Psalms – and find there what were for the people

of Israel the ancient paths. The ancient paths of prayer – where the good way lies. The ancient path wherein we find not how to get somewhere but how to be somewhere. And the somewhere is in communion with God. The Psalms beckon us on to the ancient path of holy conversation with God. Come, the good Lord says, set a spell and let us listen to one another. Take the path into this deeper ways of God. Discover where the good way lies.

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul.

Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore we will not fear.

I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

The modern path takes you somewhere, the ancient path keeps you somewhere. Keeps us in this communion with the shepherd, the refuge, the strength, the one who made heaven and earth. To dwell in the Psalms is to dwell within the ancient paths of the people of God wherein we find the heart of God, the being of God, the presence of God. And so today in Psalm 146 we find another glimpse into the heart of God. And we hear that God is the one who sets the prisoners free, God is

the one who opens the eyes of the blind, God is the one who lifts those who are bowed down, God is the one who watches over the stranger and upholds the orphan and widow. Come, says the psalmist, consider the heart of God – take the ancient path into the heart of God. Dwell there with the heart of God so that maybe someday his heart might become your heart. Dwell there on the ancient path so that someday it will be your heart to set prisoners free, bring sight to the blind, lift up the bowed down, watch over the strangers and uphold the orphans and widows.

It is these ancient paths, I suspect, of which Jesus speaks – these paths that take us into the heart of God. These narrow ways, these roads less traveled, that take us into the deep woods of the kingdom of heaven where it matters less where you are going and more of what you find right there upon the path.

The ancient path where Jesus found time and time again the imprisoned, the blind, the bowed down, the stranger, the orphan and the widow. It was the heart of God where time stood still and Jesus wasn't worried about where he was going, he was worried about the human need that was staring him in the face. On all those roads. On the rocky road into Jericho, the dusty path to Emmaus, the windy trail to Damascus, the uneven streets of Nain, the byway to Tyre and Sidon, the ascending way to Jerusalem – Jesus takes the ancient path into the deep heart of God and the deep heart of God will always, always, always be with those for whom life is a struggle.

He sets the prisoner free, he opens the eyes of the blind, he lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the stranger, upholds the widow and orphan.

Philip Hallie in his most compelling book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* tells the story of the little

village of Le Chambon in France during World War II and the German occupation. In particular he tells about the little Protestant church there in the village. A group of Huegenots who embraced peace and non-violence. The pastor's name was Andre and his wife Magda – who quietly taught the ancient paths of the Sermon on the Mount. It was the brutal winter of 1941 and the day came when a knock came to the door and Magda the pastor's wife answered the door of the manse – and there on the front porch in the swirling snow stood a shivering German Jew. A woman who had been on the run, fleeing from the Nazis who were chasing her kind. "I've heard," she said, "that this church is the kind of place that takes in people like me." It was against the law to harbor Jews. And now there one stood. What do you do? You have four kids to raise. You have a home to protect. You have dreams to pursue. You have aspirations for which to live. But there on the ancient road is a shivering Jew. What do you do? "Come in," said Magda. "Come in." And it was the start of scores of Jews being harbored in their little town. And at a high cost. Many of the church leaders were arrested and taken to the camps.

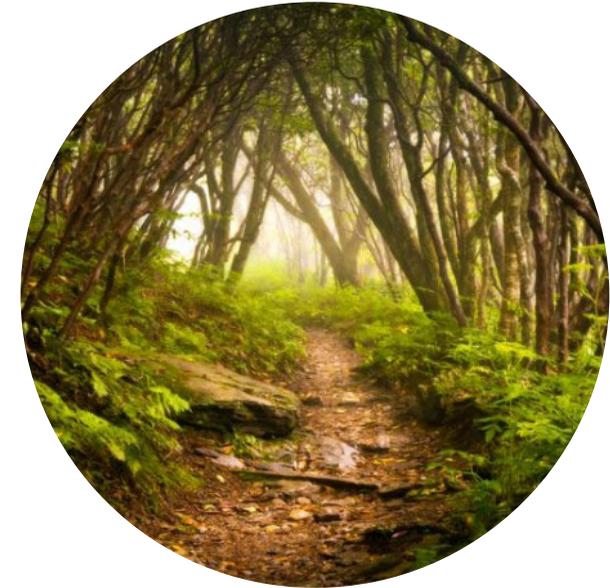
He sets the prisoner free, he opens the eyes of the blind, he lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the stranger, upholds the widow and orphan.

Stand at the crossroads, and look, ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies.

Is it the noise emanating from the modern highway that would suggest to us that the stranger, the bowed down, the widow, the orphan, the refugee – that such as these would not be welcome in our country, our state, our town, our church?

Wouldn't it be something if such as these would stand on our doorstep and say, "I've heard that this is the kind of church that would take in

someone like me." Our Session has named it as our new vision – to become the most loving place in town. To be the place where people might say to themselves, there's a place that would take in someone like me. That's a tall order for ourselves. And it will mean simplifying our mission statement into the way Jesus put it: Love God and love neighbor. What are we here to do? Love God. Love neighbor. Become the most loving place in town. For what more ancient path might there be? Where the good way lies. Into the heart of God if only to find there the face of our shivering neighbor.



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Church of the Palms

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