

Advent Study: Road Trip

Week #3

Introduction

Hello, travelers! Here we are at the third week of Advent, and our Road Trip series has hit a bit of a snag... but we'll get to that in a moment.

A few weeks ago we began our journey Packed and Ready to prepare for the arrival of Christ. And last week, we leaned into that all-too-familiar question, "Are We There Yet?" with John the Baptist as our guide, as he prepared the way for Christ.

This week we find ourselves facing an unexpected turn. It seems every trip has them. Have you ever encountered a roadblock or a detour sign when traveling? They can be minor, or sometimes they can take us way out of the way.

Our journey with God can feel much the same way. We often face challenges and uncertainties that make us question if we're on the right path.

Our reading today from John 1:6-8, 19-28, presents John the Baptist once again, but this time he's questioned about his identity. Like a detour sign causing travelers to pause and reassess, John's testimony causes us reflect on our own path.

As we navigate the twists and turns of life, let's take solace in the fact that even when we find ourselves Recalculating, God is guiding our journey. As we study and/or move towards Worship, let us trust the One who guides us.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3hjlr7Xp4o>

A clip from the 1987 film *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* where Neal and Del watch their rental car is on fire.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Prior to this scene, Neal and Del have had a number of travel mishaps from New York to Wichita to St. Louis. The intended destination has been Chicago from the beginning. What have you experienced in terms of travel mishaps? How did it work out? Was it a positive or negative experience?

2. What other circumstances have you faced where your plan was derailed and you had to re-assess the situation. Do you “think on your feet” well? Can you do this in-the-moment or do you need time to react/process before you can move forward? Or something else?
3. Neal and Del move fairly quickly from laughing to (in Neal’s case) anger. Surely we’ve all experienced the proverbial emotional roller coaster. What is your experience in the middle of these kinds of situations? How do you look at these afterward? Is there anything you’d like to change?
4. Throughout this travel adventure, Neal and Del face mishap after mishap. Of course this is for comedic affect! And there are many times that we feel like there’s one bad thing happening after another and we’re just waiting for the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. Have you felt like this before? How do you feel in these situations? How do you respond?
5. If you’ve seen the full movie, you know that there is a heartwarming ending to this story. Do you think this ending could have happened without all the in-between stuff? What in your own life do you think might be different if you hadn’t faced some of the mishaps in your own life?
6. Do you think the mishaps were necessary in this story with Neal and Del? Do you think your own mishaps were necessary? Did God (or the universe) *cause* these mishaps to bring about the “right” ending? Alternatively, do you think God *brought you out of* these mishaps and used the circumstances to help you to grow? Something else? Explore what makes you think this way.

Scripture: John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ A man named John was sent from God. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. ⁸ He himself wasn’t the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light.

¹⁹ This is John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, “Who are you?”

²⁰ John confessed (he didn’t deny but confessed), “I’m not the Christ.”

²¹ They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

John said, “I’m not.”

“Are you the prophet?”

John answered, “No.”

²² They asked, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John replied,

“I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,
Make the Lord’s path straight,
just as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴ Those sent by the Pharisees ²⁵ asked, “Why do you baptize if you aren’t the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?”

²⁶ John answered, “I baptize with water. Someone greater stands among you, whom you don’t recognize. ²⁷ He comes after me, but I’m not worthy to untie his sandal straps.” ²⁸ This encounter took place across the Jordan in Bethany where John was baptizing.

Supplemental Reading: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (CEB)

¹ The Lord God’s spirit is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.

He has sent me

to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,

² to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and a day of vindication for our God,
to comfort all who mourn,

³ to provide for Zion’s mourners,
to give them a crown in place of ashes,
oil of joy in place of mourning,
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.

They will be called Oaks of Righteousness,
planted by the Lord to glorify himself.

⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins;
they will restore formerly deserted places;
they will renew ruined cities,
places deserted in generations past.

⁸ I, the Lord, love justice;

I hate robbery and dishonesty.

I will faithfully give them their wage,

and make with them an enduring covenant.

⁹ Their offspring will be known among the nations,

and their descendants among the peoples.

All who see them will recognize

that they are a people blessed by the Lord.

¹⁰ I surely rejoice in the Lord;

my heart is joyful because of my God,

because he has clothed me with clothes of victory,

wrapped me in a robe of righteousness

like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,

and like a bride adorned in jewelry.

¹¹ As the earth puts out its growth,

and as a garden grows its seeds,

so the Lord God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations.

Scripture Discussion Questions

1. Hopefully, you are participating in this study with a partner or a group. Assuming that, divide into two groups. Have one group examine Isaiah 61:1-4, and the other verses 8-11. Look for all the images of restoration, renewal, and encouragement. Then come back together and describe why the images work (then and now) and what portrait emerges for a community under God. Where in this portrait does each participant see themselves?
2. Isaiah 61:1 speaks about the anointed one, and John 1:19-28 about one who, in effect, anoints. Can you think of any contemporary instances of this sort of action? Who, in the church or world, is an “anointed one” and who anoints? What import did that function (or functionary) have in the biblical contexts? What does it have today?
3. The Isaiah passage was spoken to a broken, beleaguered people who were held in exile for many years in a foreign land. Given the state of the world, much of which is in some sort of chaos, can you imagine who or what could stand to deliver a message of restoration? Would it be believed? In what way can one person address the chaos and offer a beacon of hope or encouragement in the midst of disarray?
4. Discuss with your partner/group the traits of John the Baptizer (John 1:6-8). John was called to witness to the light, (light referring to the Christ to come). The word “witness” here has both a judicial and religious dimension, sufficient for evidence in a trial, which suggests the seriousness and weight of his claim. In what ways do you witness? Is it serious or compelling enough to be convicting *evidence*? How might you grow to be an even better witness?

5. We are all called to live in the light. Who do you know who testifies to the light? Who are the faithful witnesses you have seen in action? How are you a witness to the light?
6. John baptized with water in the tradition of the Jews' practice of ritual cleansing (see, for example, Leviticus 15 or Matthew 15:1-2). Advent, as a season of preparation, is a time for spiritual cleansing. What attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs might you need to change to be ready to receive the Son? The Son receives us as we are, but what can you do to ensure that your spirit is in continual renewal?

More Questions Framed Differently

1. The Isaiah passage says that the Spirit of God has anointed us to proclaim the good news. What are the many ways the passage outlines that we are to do this? Who was the "us" that Isaiah was writing to? How or why do we include ourselves in that "us" today?
2. How might you translate some of these verses into today's language? (For example, "bind up the brokenhearted" may translate to, "show love to those who are grieving.")
3. Talk to your partner/group about a time when someone showed you this type of love/comfort. How did it make you feel?
4. What does it mean to "testify to the light" (John 1:7)? How might we do this?
5. When have you experienced, as John described, a "voice crying out in the wilderness" (1:23)? How does it feel to experience a voice of hope/light/comfort/peace in the midst of darkness/struggle?
6. Where in the world or in your life do you see darkness/struggle in need of God's transforming joy?

Weekly Action

Our Road Trip metaphor focuses on a Detour Sign which forces us to recalculate. John the Baptist is faced with people asking him who he is. In doing so, they emphasize his authority. Sometimes this happens to us as well. Maybe we're considered an authority because we are Christians, because we excel at our jobs, or possess knowledge on a subject. We can be elevated in a way that we might even start to believe! John quickly puts a halt to this and points to Jesus.

Think about the times and/or places you are elevated—by yourself or others. Be honest with yourself and your study partner(s) about this! On a piece of paper or a digital device, write down several ways you can respond when you are elevated this way. Be sure these ways of responding show humility, similar to how John showed humility. Then be sure to use them!

Prayer

Heavenly God, in the journey of life, we often find ourselves on unexpected paths, facing detours that we did not anticipate. In these moments of uncertainty and redirection, remind us that You walk beside us.

Lord, when the road ahead becomes unclear and we are uncertain about the next turn, grant us the assurance of Your constant presence. Let us find solace in the knowledge that while the detour may be unexpected to us, nothing is unforeseen to You.

Help us to embrace the detours, not as obstacles, but as opportunities to experience Your grace in new ways. Strengthen our faith, increase our patience, and fill our hearts with gratitude for Your unwavering guidance. In times when we feel lost or unsure, anchor us in Your love, reminding us that every journey, no matter how winding, is an opportunity to draw closer to You.

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.