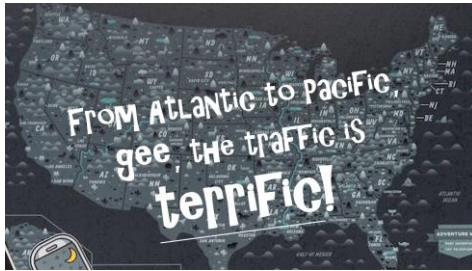


Interactive lesson



background picture cropped from <https://www.pexels.com/photo/camera-and-stationery-surrounding-map-of-usa-6960443/>

Have you ever gone on a road trip somewhere really fun, or planned a special vacation?

<Let them respond>

Where did you go (where would you want to go)?

<Let them respond>

Did (Could) you just decide, "I want to go there!", jump in the car, and go? <Let them respond>

How did you (would you want to) prepare for the trip?

<Let them respond>

How did (would) you feel on the way traveling there?

<Let them respond>

Did you (Do you think you would) get lost or have to ask for directions? <Let them respond>

Did you (Do you think you would) get into any arguments with those traveling with you?

<Let them respond>

Generally, when heading for something we expect to be fun, we are happy about it. Think about Christmas coming; in Advent, we are preparing to meet our Lord.

Given how awesome God is, what do you think our path there might be like? <Let them respond>

Do we sometimes get sidetracked, lost, and have to ask for directions? <Let them respond>

Do we sometimes argue with those accompanying us along the way? <Let them respond>

How do you think Jesus would want us to be traveling on His highway? <Let them respond>

We know something wonderful is coming, even if we are not sure what. Let us trust God and celebrate in this season, anticipating the joy and wonder to come.

Gospel lesson

In today's gospel lesson, we hear of how even the one proclaiming Christ's coming had questions about the Messiah:



*picture screencaptured from
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BjXIZ16Bng>;
credit: LUMO*

Matthew 11:2-11

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples

³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:

⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?

⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn "It Came upon the Midnight Clear">

UMH #218>

Message: The Lord's Highway



Foreground picture from
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/an-advent-song-of-ascents/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/second-sunday-of-advent-year-a-graphics>

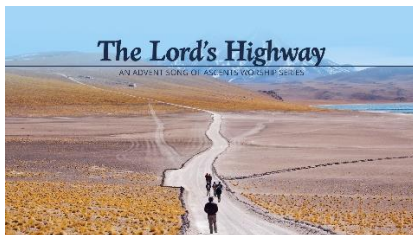
Please pray with me?

Beloved God who calls us to You,
 as we take time now to further consider today's
 scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may celebrate with joy on our path to You and
 enable others to joyfully seek You too. Amen.

We continue our series "An Advent Song of Ascents"
 with "The Lord's Highway."



picture from
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/an-advent-song-of-ascents/third-sunday-of-advent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/third-sunday-of-advent-year-a-graphics>

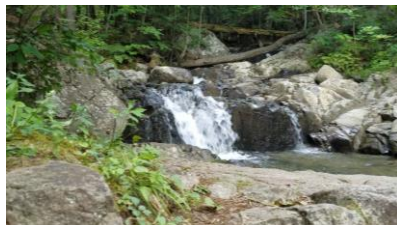
"Joy Sunday says it all. The third Sunday of
 Advent is marked by the pink- or rose-colored
 candle in the wreath in many traditions.

It is the one where we are reminded of the news
 that shall be a great joy to all people—the news
 that Emmanuel is born, God with us.

And we stand in the promise even today, even here,
in this place, in your place – God is with you.
There can be no greater joy than that.”

Those who know me well know that I love waterfalls. I got a book about waterfalls in the Adirondacks; I subsequently made my husband take me to several trailheads and hike to some of those waterfalls.

There was one waterfall trail on Whiteface Mountain that we climbed up. We prepared for the hike in what we wore and by packing water bottles; I also took my camera. Despite the steepness of the climb, I was really happy to be going through the beautiful woods alongside a lovely stream.



picture from MMMS collection

This is just one of many pictures I took along the way. This little fall put me in further anticipation of what the bigger falls at the top might be like.

We did get off trail a couple of times, once taking a side trail by mistake and having to double back. We had never been on that trail before and sometimes were not sure which was the right direction. For the most part, following the stream kept us on course.

Our spiritual journey is a lot like that. We know

something amazing and beautiful awaits us with God.

Just as I was happy just being in the beautiful woods God created, enjoying Keven's company and full of anticipation about the lovely waterfall to be seen, we can enjoy our beautiful lives now, enjoying one another's company and the blessings we can share with one another, full of anticipation about the return of Jesus and the life to come.

But it can be challenging to live as a Christian. Society flows in an easier direction, so to enjoy our journey, we need to prepare for it. Worship and prayer are critical for our spiritual health and comfort on this trek.

We may find that we need to go against popular opinion sometimes. We may go off in a wrong direction and have to correct our mistakes, but if we follow what Jesus taught, then we can stay in healthy relationships with God and others. We even may have encounters that are a foretaste of the glory to come.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/prodigal-son/>

Throughout history people have struggled with staying on the right spiritual path. Isaiah refers to people who were weak, fearful, handicapped, and going

astray. Mary's Magnificat mentions the proud and powerful on thrones while there are the hungry poor, and James admonishes those who are impatient and grumbling. All of them contrast what has been normal in the society of their day with God's kingdom, where all are treated equitably with grace.

We need to be wary of getting caught up in the rat race, in pride of self over community, of getting so caught up in our own lives that we complain when we do not get our own way, spiritually weak and fearful. Look instead at what could be!

Isaiah describes God renewing and restoring people to *shalom* (a peaceful wholeness), and providing a clear, safe road into the holy kingdom. Mary praises the great Equalizer who lifts up the lowly and shows mercy. James reminds us that God works according to God's timing, for the best possible outcomes.

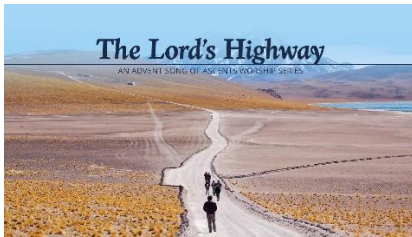


picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/john-baptist-prison/>

And what of John the Baptist, stuck in prison and questioning if Jesus is the Messiah? Jesus did not get mad at him for having doubts; instead, He had the disciples return to John with word that the Baptist's work had come to fruition, and Jesus praised John to the crowds.

God knows that even the most dedicated people get confused at times, misunderstanding how their prayers are answered. God refocuses us on what is best, blesses us abundantly in line with that, and enables community development through those blessings.

So this week, work on losing the ego: it is not about you, or me, or any one person in our community; it is about God and preparing for His coming. Trust in God's timing and methods! If your plans do not work out as you thought they should, take a deep breath, pray, and move forward as the Holy Spirit guides you.



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/an-advent-song-of-ascents/third-sunday-of-advent-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/third-sunday-of-advent-year-a-graphics>

Continue to help others, and tell them about God in your life. Be an instrument of the Holy Spirit, preparing the Lord's highway for all to seek God, and celebrate in joy!

<Confession and Pardon

UM BOW #490>

Let us pray:

O merciful God,

we confess that we have not acknowledged you as the source of our successes, our substance, our selves. We have been far more ready to complain when things go wrong than to praise when all is well. We have fed our bodies a rich diet while neglecting to feed our souls.

Power and wealth have assumed greater importance to us than sensitivity and service.

We have allowed religious words and forms to substitute for living encounters with the persons you have called us to love.

Forgive us, compassionate Redeemer, and grant us the opportunity to start over again.

Keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past or from new evils that could mislead or destroy.

In the name of Christ, we offer our earnest prayers for pardon and deliverance.

Amen.

(Lavon Bayler, U.S.S., 20th Cent., Alt.)

Our almighty and all-loving God reconciled the world to Himself through Jesus Christ.

Be reconciled now with one another, that we might dwell in the warmth of God's love.

Through the Holy Spirit,

put aside the cloak of pride and put on Christ, that we may forgive and be forgiven.

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

Glory to God. Amen.

<Doxology>

<Offertory / Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

Generous God, as we bring our gifts to you this day, we acknowledge that we have been given so much by your goodness, but we have been tight-fisted and slow in giving to help others.

In this Advent season of preparation, we ask you to

help us live in a new way, to walk a new highway, to set ourselves on the path that leads to a closer walk with Jesus, our example and redeemer.

May this be the season when he finds the highways to our hearts prepared for his coming.

(above prayer from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)

- Lord, please help {these members of the body of Christ whom we lift up} with Your healing touch and comfort:
 - -
 - -
 - -
 - -
 - -
 - -
 - -
- Thanks for
 - -
 - -
- Hold those who cannot be with us in Your loving embrace until we see them again.
 - Family far off
 - Travelers
- Lord, please help all people who struggle, especially those to whom we remain oblivious.
- Send Your Spirit to address world/social problems
 - end bigotry, dismantle racism, reform systems persist
 - bring world peace

- Guide our Leaders – local, state, federal, international, and especially of Your church.

All these things we lift up in Your holy name,
praying as You taught us to pray: *<Lord's Prayer>*

<Hymn "Joy to the World" UMH #246>

<Benediction>



*background picture from
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As we leave this building
and continue on our faith journeys,
As we encounter others who are seeking,
Let us sing on the highway of our Lord
of the kingdom of God among us
and of our Christ coming again in glory
That the whole world may prepare!
Amen.