

**ADVENT 2C 2024**  
**Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church**  
**Wilmington, Delaware**  
**December 8, 2024**

When I was a teenager, I watched as a new interstate highway was built through farmland west of Charleston, West Virginia. I learned to drive on parts of that highway as it expanded near my neighborhood into what was then the largest city in the state. Eventually, it connected with two other interstate highways, right in the heart of the city.

Later on, I watched as new developments grew along those highways, at least where hills and rivers didn't constrain them. There remained a lot of work to be done, especially on a dreaded section of highway known as the turnpike. It was saved until last, which, in retrospect, meant it was also the most costly, as prices didn't go down on labor and materials into the 1970s and early 80s.

Highways in that region were seen as openings to growth and development. Several of them were built as part of "Appalachian corridors," connecting cities with remote towns and rural areas.

One such place lobbied to have the interstate highway pass them by, locating it on the other side of a river. They're still coming to terms with some of the consequences of that effort, but the road is not changing its path. Other areas, especially those in poorer sections and those neighborhoods where non-whites were often told they had to live due to red-lining and other restrictions, saw decimating destruction as heavy equipment razed homes and businesses to make way for highways and ramps. Whole neighborhoods were destroyed. One such entity was an Episcopal parish built by those of African ancestry. Its former address is now the location of a couple of concrete columns supporting an off-ramp into downtown Charleston.

Those folks built their former structure after many years of neglect and, let's face it, abuse by the leadership of the large downtown parish. They were told they could only worship at 4 PM on Sundays, and many times the priest didn't show up because, well, he had better things to do, in his own opinion. And on some Sundays, no one showed up to unlock the doors so they might enter. That larger parish remains, although it is much diminished by movement away from the effects of decisions made by civic and religious leaders more than a half-century ago. I call it my home parish, and was ordained there twenty years ago this week.

Much was gained by the construction of those highways, and much was lost in the process as well. Leaders today often find themselves caught in the necessity to emphasize the gains even as they are sometimes asked to apologize for the negative consequences of the decisions of others, decisions made even before some of today's leaders were born.

We gather in this place during Advent and hear familiar stories. We might cringe a bit when we hear calls from those like John the Baptist, who stress uncomfortable things like repentance and sin and our need to change. But it's only for an hour or so, and we can get right back to our over-scheduled lives because, you know, people will talk if we don't show up for every important thing happening this month. But there's good news. We'll have January to collapse and rest while all the tax forms arrive in the mail to remind us that Spring is coming!

Prepare the way of the Lord, John says. Fill the valleys, level the hills. While we might hear that call as an urgent message to invest in a heavy equipment manufacturer, John has other ideas. The reign of God is at hand, its presence made flesh and walking among us even as we speak.

So how are we doing on our road construction plans? Are we even making them? Are we looking at ways to do it that don't require much of us, but may ask others to do more than possible to be a part of the journey? Are we finding discounts for ourselves at the toll booth while raising that figure for others?

The construction project for what the hymn writer called "the King's highway" costs the same for each of us. It's found in repentance, that "R" word John keeps going on about. Repentance is at the heart of the Good News John points to. Repentance is the threshold in the doorway opened by forgiveness, even as we proclaim God's forgiveness of sin applies to everyone. Repentance is our activity, done in humility, which serves as a reminder that many times in our past we were on the wrong road. Repentance is our admission that forgiveness is necessary. When we choose to not repent, we deny forgiveness, even if the offer still stands. We must remember the words we pray whenever we gather together: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Too often we try to save ourselves from a humble approach, while we require some form of humiliation for others. Even then, what might feel like humiliation may be our denial of the need for humility, an attempt to avoid the consequences of having to turn around and use the time and fuel to get back to the right path.

Repentance gives us the ability to join others and to invite them to join us as we journey together on this King's highway. The road is prepared ahead of us by the one who bore humility and rejection to the extreme in order to show us the way.

So we must ask ourselves whether the road we travel is itself an invitation to life as promised by the one who gave his life for us. Does the highway we propose, and are in process of building, lead to the promised city of God? We may not know the answers, yet. But there are signs and markers along the way that will keep us on the right path.

We'll take some detours along the way, perhaps take a scenic route, even if it's the wrong off-ramp. We might get lost and need to turn around a couple of times. But

the way is for all who want to journey into its fulness, and an eternity of wonder and beauty awaits at our hoped-for destination.