



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year C – Second Sunday in Advent – December 9, 2018 *The Hamakua Highway*

I often drive the road from Hilo on the Big Island to Honokaa, my family's hometown. That stretch of road along the Hamakua Coast is thought by many to be one of the most beautiful drives in the Hawaiian Islands, taking you along high cliffs with waterfalls, lush valleys, and beautiful ocean views with back drops of Mauna Kea and Haleakala.

Generally it takes about an hour to make that drive, on a good day maybe 45 minutes. If there's traffic or construction on the road, sometimes it can take a bit longer. It all depends.

I've been going up and down that road for as long as I can remember and on one of those trips my grandfather turned makai and off on to what I thought was a side street in the town of Onomea so that he could show me what the road was like when he was a little kid. At that time I had no clue that the road that we normally drove on was new and had replaced one that was quite old — the Old Mamalahoa Highway, the old road that hugged the coast line and curved this way and that through canopies of rain forest trees and over rivers and streams and then twisted on up through cane field blades of leaves that danced in the wind like green ocean waves against the backdrop of the Hamakua skies. I think the only road left like that these days that people use regularly is the drive to Hana on the island of Maui where even today sometimes you have to stop on the part road and let the other drivers go by. It's still that narrow.

I still remember my grandfather telling me that it took him four hours to take the trip from Honokaa to Hilo when he was a little boy. And today I think an hour is a long time and I try to do it in 45 minutes!

As time moved on and technology progressed, they were able to build a new road — one that would get you to Hilo much faster. And even though it may not seem like it if you're driving it today, they made that pathway straight, compared to the road that it replaced. And now what was a four-hour trip can be done in 45 minutes on a good day.

We hear the admonition from the Prophet Isaiah in the Gospel of Luke this morning to make our pathways straight and the rough ways smooth. And when I hear that I think of the road from Hilo to Honokaa.

It sounds like an easy concept, but then the implementation of it really isn't all that easy. It took a lot of work to make that pathway straight. They had to grade the road and cover it with asphalt. They had to construct large and complex bridges so that you can go over the valleys rather than into and along them. They had to carve away part of the mountains. And they had to come up with the money to pay for it all.

On top of that, they had to think outside the box. They didn't, after all, just cover up an old path — it's still there. They created a new one with new technology that could make the road wider and smoother, and bridges that were taller and sturdier than the ones on the old road. And they had to come up with a new path — one that was straight instead of hugging the cliff lines and curving this way and that as it snaked its way between Hilo and Honokaa.

“Our beloved Church regards her children as having bodies as well as souls to be cared for, and sanctions the consecration of these and all that is beautiful in nature and art to the service of God.” . . - Queen Emma.

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And to me, this mirrors our lives of faith. We're called to make our spiritual pathways straight and smooth away the parts that are rough. And that takes a lot of hard work. We have to come to worship. We have to take communion. We have to study the Bible. We have to become invested in a church community. And on top of that, we have to spend time in prayer. It's hard work.

But I think the really hard part is doing what the engineers on that new road had to do — coming up with new ways, technology, and ideas to build the road that was not only straight, but also stronger, stronger than the old road. They had to let go of ideas about old ways of traveling. And they also had to let go of the tradition of going on an old road that was really quite beautiful, even if it took a long time to travel on it. Basically, the engineers were willing to make a change and then make room for inspiration and ideas to come.

I think in this day and age, that's the real call for us as we endeavor to make our pathways straight and smooth away the parts of the path in our spiritual lives that are rough. Do we continue to do the things the way we've always done them? Or are we willing to make changes, bearing in mind that if we were not, we really should go back to the tradition of the original church and meet in houses of members on Sunday mornings?

And like I always say, if God didn't mean for us to change our ways and think of new things and was satisfied with us being just the way we are and never growing or evolving, God would've never sent the Christ child that we wait for this Advent season — there would have been no need.

To change is to be Christian. To renew it is to be Christian. To do things differently is to be Christian. And in response to that, how often do we hear:

- We've always done it that way; or
- We've never done it that way.

And I understand. In a world of constant change, the church is the one thing we want to be the same — the steady, the sure, the certain that we can hold on to as a spiritual security blanket. But is that what God is calling us to be? While God is steady, sure, and certain for us; I'm not so sure that the methodology of how we quote/unquote be in community is never supposed to change.

That's why we meet in churches instead of houses. That's why we worship in English and Hawaiian rather than Latin, Aramaic, or Greek. That's why we sing music with complex scores rather than chant Gregorian chant. That's why I face you during the Eucharist rather than facing the high altar. All of these things were changes — new ways, endeavors to make the pathways Street and to smooth out the rough ways so that we can grow closer to God and so that it's easier for us to feel God's presence.

And from where we are now, how do we travel on smooth pathways in to our future? I've often asked questions about the future of the church like this:

- If you're homebound and you have bread and wine before you with the priest on the video screen, would that be a valid holy Communion and would you be part of the Sunday count?
- When the cost of paper becomes prohibitive, can we all come to church with our iPads and download the service and read it off our tablets and smart phones?
- And then the other thing I always wonder about is, when are we going to revise The Book of Common Prayer? If we weren't willing to do that, we would still be worshipping from something out of 1662.

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Right now, I don't have answers, but I definitely sit with questions like these as I think about playing the long game in creating a straight road toward my life in the church after my retirement and then wondering what the church will be like 50 years from now, probably after I'm gone.

I don't know. I don't know, but I do wonder and I do get excited.

I know my grandfather loved going from Honokaa to Hilo when he was a little kid, taking four hours to curve along the Hamakua cliff lines and taking in the rainforests, the rivers, the cane fields, the mountains, the ocean, and the sky. For him it was a thrill.

And today I know that I love going from Honokaa to Hilo taking 45 minutes to drive over valleys and look down into rivers while going over straight bridges. And I can still see the rainforests, the rivers, the remnants of cane fields, the mountains, the ocean, and the sky. For me it's a thrill, but a different kind of thrill—it's about speed, knowing that I can take a journey in 45 minutes that took my grandfather four hours.

And when I travel that Hamakua roadway today, my favorite part of the drive is going from Hilo toward Honokaa and coming out of the last gulch and into Ookala Town. The road takes a gentle curve to the left and goes up about a 30° grade that's become smooth and straight and upward and I always feel like I'm driving into the sky. And that symbolizes the future for me — speeding in to the vast unknown mystery of possibilities in the Christian life and the presence of God made manifest, and the beautiful Hamakua sky that hovers above my road, and my grandfather's old road, blending it all into one and knowing that past, present, and future are all beautiful in God's sight.

*Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

Amen.