

What would you say Henry David Thoreau is best known for? Thoreau was a 19th century American naturalist, essayist, poet, and philosopher. Today he would probably be called a Libertarian because he believed that “government is best which governs least.” You may be most familiar with Thoreau’s adage that says, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” You may even believe it. I don’t know if it’s desperation, but it’s true that for far too many of us, day slowly fades into night then into day again with no real joy, excitement, or exhilaration. Existence is blah...if even that good. It’s mainly boring.

Unfortunately, things are never that simple. In fact, just the opposite is true. Yes, there *are* boring, blah times in our lives which may even make up the major portion of our lives, but what defines us are those times that are anything but boring. The SHOCKS! And they happen to all of us. They might come on a global scale, December 7, 1941 or 9/11/2001. Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when you heard? How about a year ago when terrorists slaughtered 1200 Israelis and other citizens? Do you remember?

Other shocks are not so cosmic, but they are large nonetheless. How about the families of Christopher Santora and José Guadalupé, two firefighters from New York’s Engine Company 54 who lost their lives at the World Trade Center? Years later they learned that Christopher’s body was buried in a funeral service for José—a somewhat bizarre and complicated case of mistaken identity. What a terrible shock! Who in Erie, Pennsylvania or Buffalo, NY over the past week would say life is a bore? People were trapped in hotel rooms without food because of the 3-4 feet of snow that covered our neighbors to the north. Shocks do come to us all. And they change us. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. In many cases, the direction of the change is very much in our own hands. We can become bitter or better.

For what comfort it offers, let me remind you that the gospel story of Jesus we turn to on the second Sunday of Advent is a wonderful context for dealing with shocks. You see, the whole gospel is really one shock after another when it is

read in context. Think about it. God in human flesh. *Big shock*. Born to an unwed teenage mother. *Another shock*. From Nazareth which even the apostles felt was a no-account town: “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” said Nathaniel to Phillip in John 1:46. *A shock*. King of kings and Lord of lords. A gilded cradle for the newborn? No, a manger full of cattle fodder. *Shock, shock, shock*. One shock after another.

And the shocks would continue. As Jesus ministered around the countryside, he taught things like “*Blessed are,*” or to speak with a more colloquial sound, “*Congratulations to those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*” Huh? “*Congratulations to the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” C’mon now. “*Congratulations when you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake*” (Matthew 5: 4, 5, 10). You’ve got to be kidding! There was Jesus’ teaching that said, “*The greatest among you will be your servant*” (Matthew 23:11). Oh, sure! Then there was that strange saying that “*the last shall be first...*” (Matthew 20:16). Not what any of us would expect.

Finally, the incredible shock to those who loved him came when Jesus was tortured and murdered. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, restored the limbs of the lame, and even brought those who were dead back to life. The hopes and dreams of his followers convinced them that this was God’s Messiah—the Anointed One, the one who would lead them into a glorious future. But now those hopes and dreams were turned to dust and ashes. It was over. Or was it? We know better. There was one more very big *shock* to come. The incredible *shock* of Resurrection.

I told you that the story of Jesus is one shock after another...after another...after another. Truthfully, a comforting thought when I realize that the times I need Jesus most are usually when I’m experiencing some sort of shock of my own. But no matter how shocking, my shocks will not be more than Jesus can handle. And as I said a moment ago, the shocks of life do not necessarily push us in one direction or another. The choice is ours. They can make us bitter or better.

Now, let's consider there is more to this Scripture than the comfort of knowing the Lord is not put off by the shocks of this world. A few of the people named in today's Scripture are Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas—all the powerful leaders of the world at that time. They were emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests. They were the ones who held the levers of power. They were the ones who determined the course of civilization. They were the ones who determined what was a priority, where the focus would be placed in the world of their day. But notice what Luke does; after listing all these worldly powers, Luke then simply says, "*the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*"

Let the bigwigs launch their policy initiatives, levy their taxes, try to keep Rome from going over one fiscal cliff or another. Let Caesar write himself into the history books and let Herod do whatever in the world it was Herod wanted to do. Let the religious folks carry out their sacred duties and keep up the rituals of the ages. But if it's the climax of salvation you're looking for, then turn away from all of that. Go to the WILDERNESS. Go to the crazy guy IN THE WILDERNESS who has lit out on a career of fire-and-brimstone prophetic preaching.

Luke says this where the "Salvation Highway of Our God" is being constructed. Rome built its aqueducts and highways and bridges, true enough. You could get around the ancient world better than at almost any point in recorded human history. The roads were impressive. Caesar's wife had begun a "Highway Beautification" initiative. The roads were grand, the travel was easy, the trade routes were prosperous. But not one of those roads could finally take you anywhere worth going. It's true that traveling on them could help you get around in the world but not one of them could save the world, or certainly not usher in a whole New World. For that road, you had to go to a place of death, to the dangerous WILDERNESS where robbers lurked, and wild beasts devoured the wayward traveler. You had to go to the place that symbolized everything that was wrong with this world because that was the place—logically enough,

if you stop to think about it—from which God launched his final push to defeat the Chaos of evil and restore his good Creation.

In our world today, we still mostly look to all the wrong places for hope: to Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, and so on. Luke says, “Nothing doing.” Hope won’t come from those places. Not in the end. Not ultimately. Look to the unlikely places. Look to the little white clapboard church in the middle of nowhere in which sermons are preached full of Jesus and full of grace. Look to the relief worker ministering in Jesus’ name to people in sub-Saharan Africa who seem to suffer from every variant of every pandemic. If you want change that lasts, transformation that taps into what C.S. Lewis called “the deep magic of the universe,” those are the places to go. Then there are those soaring words of Isaiah: *“Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”*

The picture Isaiah the prophet paints is like the massive engineering efforts of ancient Babylon and Rome. Straight new roads, not the old roads that follow the terrain. It’s the difference in going from Pittsburgh to Erie on I-79 instead of going all the way on Route 19. For ancient people, this was a theological statement. Nothing must be allowed to impede or delay the coming of God. What an awesome Advent message for us to hear! Get out the bulldozers and the backhoes, the rock crushers and the road graders:

*There are mountains that need to come down; mountains of racism, ageism, and any other “-ism” that blocks our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our Lord.

*There are valleys to be filled; valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, sorrow, or pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship our Savior offers and keeps us from enjoying the fellowship of faith.

*There are crooked places to be made straight; yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine; fancy exteriors can mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence.

*There are rough places to be made smooth; rough places that have come because of hatred, oppression, and injustice.

Let's think again about the Henry David Thoreau quote: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation?" This quote is often used to describe the reality of modern life, where people are trapped in a cycle of work, leisure, and materialism. But none of us need to be trapped. The work of the kingdom is joyful work, lasting work, purposeful work! Let's roll in the heavy equipment!

There is a wonderful conclusion to all of this. As the Scripture says, "*And all people will see God's salvation.*" **Picture it. A mass of humanity that suffers through periods of *quiet desperation* interspersed with *inevitable shocks* is stretched out along the hillsides overlooking a wonderful wide highway.** As far as the eye can see they are spread out. Men and women, boys and girls. Rich and poor, young and old, slave and free. Every nation, tongue, and tribe. All are anxiously gathering to watch for the arrival of the King of all kings who is the embodiment of God's salvation, God's healing, and God's shalom.

Can you see him? Yes, I know our vision is hampered. The mountains are so high and the valleys so low, the crooked places are still horribly crooked and the rough places resist every attempt to smooth them out. And yes, life is both boring AND shocking.

But look beyond all that. Look to God's salvation...Yeshua...Yehsus...Jesus. See Jesus in the pages of Scripture...see Jesus in the lives of your fellow worshipers...see Jesus in the faces of those whose needs we try to meet...see Jesus present when we gather in this place. Clearer and clearer the picture becomes. Can you see it? Look and keep on looking. It will come into focus.

"All people (even you and me) will see God's salvation." This is a promise from on high! We will see Jesus. And it will be the very best shock of all.

Amen!

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