

DESOLATION BOULEVARD

Everybody knows what a mess is.

When things are not ordered and in place as we desire, then we can call it a mess, such as Katherine's bedroom. And, there is a difference between cluttered and a "mess". My desk is cluttered.

Cluttered can be tidied... or cleaned up.
A mess is: "Where to begin; it seems hopeless."

I've seen 7 tornadoes, and I've seen what a tornado can do.
I arrived in Louisville, KY 30 minutes after a F4 tornado went through, and what I saw was a MESS:
... huge trees were toppled and shredded;
... houses were levelled and debris was scattered all over;
... cars were contorted and stacked on top of each other, and.... people were drifting about searching for
the way things were.

That was a mess, and it wasn't limited to the physical.
The haunting desolation includes the emotional and mental torment of trying to figure out "Why?" and....
dealing with the deep loss of possessions, expectations, dreams and.... maybe even loved ones.

Sometimes life can be a mess, when there is no hope, no solutions can be seen and dread overwhelms like a desert.
It may be of our own doing, the malice from others or it could just be bad luck, like being in the path of a tornado. Either way desolation is not a good condition.
The Bible often refers to that condition as a wilderness.

Isaiah was writing to people caught in a wilderness experience.
They were in spiritual decay. They were consumed with woe and they couldn't see anything promising. God was merely something to placate, and ignore. They were stuck on "Desolation Boulevard".

In the Matthew passage, John the Baptist was feeling much the same way.
He was in prison, and prison was not a happy place to be.
Moreover, he was tormented with frustration and doubt.
He thought he'd been faithful. He tried to proclaim the message he was inspired to present, yet.... it didn't make sense that he was locked away and facing death.
We believers sometimes suffer from the illusion that being faithful guarantees reward, and if things turn into a mess, then it must be God's doing.
Paul points out in I Corinthians 14:33 that "God is not a God of disorder, but a God of peace – wholeness."

We should be careful about reading meaning into calamities or desolation, and we should Not discern good fortune as God's confirmation on our choices, either.
**Life and the way of God is much bigger than our desires.*

An aside: for the most part, the Bible does a good job of revealing the flaws in its heroes.

Yet, on the other hand, we have the story of Mary and Joseph.

They were a frightened, very young couple who feared scorn and rejection. After all, Mary was pregnant, and they were not yet married?

Reading into the narrative, we could assume that gossip was already spreading. They likely hadn't planned to start their marriage with a baby, and where would they live? Who would accept them?

They must have felt like they were in a terrible mess,... and where were their parents in all this?

Young couples starting out on their own with a baby is truly an arduous journey.

Those assumptions about Mary and Joseph are inferences,..... that actually ignore the purpose of the story.

As Christianity was getting established as a religion separate from Judaism, two of the Gospel writers saw the need to enrich the persona of Jesus for all the sceptics. So, the birth narratives were included to demonstrate the wonder and purity of Jesus,.... and the role of the parents were important too, especially the mother – Mary.

Mary's image was really polished and embellished..... because the mother of the Saviour of the world needs to be pretty special, too.

I'm sure she was an amazing woman, yet..... I really don't think a 12-14 year old, pregnant, awestruck girl would be able to craft such eloquent words as are credited to her in Luke one.

We know that song of praise by the first word in Latin – Magnificat – “Magnifies.”

That beautiful praise poem is patterned after Hannah's Song in First Samuel, and it includes other Messianic lines lifted from other parts of the Old Testament.

She may have felt those thoughts.... and maybe said the same thing in her own simple way, yet..... Well, it was important for her to appear flawless.... being the mother of the Christ and all.

We humans seem to need heroes, and we want our role models and leaders to be perfect or near flawless. That was true back then, too.

Even though Jesus constantly tried to direct the focus to God and to serving others, he quickly became an icon to hold onto.

In part that is okay, as long as we don't gloss over what is important, which is being in a right relationship with God,.... and God is love,... and thus that means reaching out and being love.

Simply, claiming Jesus as one does an idol, is really missing the mark.

To be sure, we do invest a lot into our heroes, and when they fall, then we feel the pain, anger and frustration, too.

We want to believe that our heroes can achieve what we have not be able to do. Hero worship is vicarious living. We want to believe that everything is wonderful with our idols and our leaders, and those in such a spot light work very hard to hone and retain their image..... because they know how important it is.

Politicians need to appear strong and competent, yet also folksy, so they sing Beatle songs or eat Barbeques with the common people.

We really don't want to know about their troubles, doubts, worries or flaws. We don't want them to be only human.....

And, when they fall and the hype gets exposed, we get upset, drop them and search for another hero.... to fill our void.

To be sure, we believe that Jesus was the real deal, and we base that on his actions.

I think Jesus was the only person capable of practising what he preached.

To insist that we must practise what we preach demands that either we have to dilute the message to fit us.... or ... we pretend to be what we are not – that we create a false image like most famous heroes do.

The Gospel message/ Jesus' message / God's way is much bigger than we are. It is much bigger and grander than the messenger.

We must strive to live that way, yet we are flawed, and we dare not dilute the message to serve our own interests.

Take note of the interaction between John the Baptist and Jesus.

As mentioned, John's in a bad way, yet is still looking out in hope for the Messiah. He wonders if the rumours he's heard about Jesus are true, and asks his friends to check out this "Jesus."

Jesus responded, "Go tell John what you see and hear: people are being cured; people are finding new insight.... and new life." Jesus then adds another beatitude: "Blessed are those who are not offended by me."

This is most fascinating. Moreover, the emphasis is on what is happening to those around Jesus. Jesus did NOT say, "Hey, I'm the hero; I'm the Messiah", but rather he gave an invitation to look around.

And then, Jesus took the time to affirm John/ to lift him up, and to scold those who judged John the Baptist based on his appearances / his persona.

Jesus finishes his reply with the message about the least being the greatest.

So, back to the beginning,..... what are we to do when life is a mess?

How can we get off our journey down Desolation Boulevard?

Where is the exit from a wilderness?And, the solution is not looking for a hero.

Four lessons for getting unstuck:

First. Be patient and Keep looking ahead with faith in God. The current situation is not the end of the story. There is more to come, and God is present in the world. The realm of God is still unfolding. There is hope.

As I mentioned, a few weeks ago, waiting suggests active preparation.

For example, Hesston, Kansas was totally destroyed by a tornado; amazingly no one was killed. The place was a mess, yet it was completely rebuilt into a much better place than before.

Lesson one – be actively patient. We don't know the future, so there is still reason to hope.

Lesson 2: Expand your view, and stop the naval gazing. Life is more than just about self and the present quagmire, so look outward and get more information. John, while in prison, kept looking for the Messiah, and sent his friends out to get more information. And, as we know, Jesus said, “look and listen” to what is happening. He didn’t say, “Hey look at me, I’m the centre of the universe. Jesus said look around. do the research, and don’t be myopic—only seeing oneself.

That’s lesson two.

The third relates to the second and the fourth, and thus the third has two sides.

One side is: don’t be a hero; admit you need help and seek it, as John did. The other side is: offer help to those struggling and in need, as Jesus did. Jesus responded to John, and intentionally, for all to hear, affirmed John.

We must undergird those who are struggling. We need to help those in the midst of a mess, especially with affirmation.

The wilderness experience can be endured when we help each other, and strengthen the spirits of those in despair.

So, lesson three is community living: seek help and be the help.

Lesson four connects to three and is the heart and essence of Jesus’ message / the Gospel message/ the Psalmist message and Isaiah’s message – It is the way of God. It is living and being in love.

To the people stuck in a wilderness, Isaiah implores them to:
Strengthen the weak; to support those who can’t stand alone;
To encourage and comfort the fearful and broken hearted;

The Psalmist in Psalm 146 says the same thing and adds:

Don’t put your trust in heroes / in mere mortals, but instead reach out as God does, and do justice for the oppressed and give food to the hungry.

Lesson four is to love, to love God, God’s way and others, and love invests in others. Love affirms, balances, lifts up, brings justice and is gracious. When we reach out in love, putting our focus on those who are in need, instead of ourselves, then we will find ourselves in a different place.

As Isaiah calls it, we will not longer be travelling on the desolation boulevard, but instead will be on the Holy way.

The Holy way is our path to salvation and the world’s salvation.

It is Advent: we are invited to a new way; a journey of hope..... because there is love.

Thanks be to God.