

It was Christmas Eve and, as usual, George Mason was the last to leave the office. He walked over to a massive safe, spun the dials, swung the heavy door open. Making sure the door would not close behind him, he stepped inside. A square of white cardboard was taped just above the topmost row of strong-boxes. On the card a few words were written. George Mason stared at those words, remembering...

Exactly one year before he had entered this self-same vault. And then, behind his back, slowly, noiselessly the ponderous door swung shut. He was trapped—entombed in the sudden and terrifying dark. He hurled himself at the unyielding door, his hoarse cry sounding like an explosion. Through his mind flashed all the stories he had heard of men found suffocated in time-vaults. No time clock controlled this mechanism; the safe would remain locked until it was opened from the outside. He would have to wait until tomorrow morning. Then, the realization hit him. No one would come tomorrow because tomorrow was Christmas.

Once more he flung himself at the door, shouting wildly, until he sank on his knees exhausted. Silence came, a high-pitched, singing silence that seemed deafening. More than 36 hours would pass before anyone came, 36 hours in a steel box three feet wide, eight feet long, seven feet high. Would the oxygen last? Perspiring and breathing heavily, he felt his way around the floor. Then, in the far right-hand corner, just above the floor, he found a small, circular opening. Quickly he thrust his finger into it and felt, faint but unmistakably, a cool current of air. The tension release was so sudden that he burst into tears. But at last he sat up. Surely he would not have to stay trapped for the full 36 hours. Surely somebody would miss him.

George was unmarried and lived alone. The maid who cleaned his apartment was just a servant; he had always treated her as such. He had been invited to spend Christmas Eve with his brother's family, but the children got on his nerves, and they expected presents. A friend had asked him to go to a home for elderly people on Christmas Day and play the piano since George was a good pianist. But he had made some or other excuse; he had intended to sit at home with a good cigar, listening to some new recordings he was giving himself. George dug his nails into the palms of his hands until the pain balanced the misery in his mind. Nobody would come and let him out. Nobody. Nobody.

Miserably the whole of Christmas Day went by, and the succeeding night. On the morning after Christmas the head clerk came into the office at the usual time, opened the safe, then went on into his private office. No one saw George Mason stagger out into the corridor, run to the water cooler, and drink great gulps of water. No one paid any attention to him as he left and took a taxi home. There he shaved, changed his wrinkled clothes, ate breakfast and returned to his office, where other employees greeted him casually.

That day he met several acquaintances and talked to his own brother. Grimly, inexorably, the truth closed in on George Mason. He had vanished from human society during the great festival of Christian fellowship—at the most “wonderful” time of the year—and no one had missed him at all. Reluctantly, George began to think about the true meaning of Christmas. Was it possible that he had been blinded all

these years with selfishness, indifference, pride? Wasn't giving, after all, the essence of Christmas because it marked the time God gave his own Son to the world?

All through the year that followed, with little timid deeds of kindness, with small, unnoticed acts of unselfishness, George Mason tried to prepare himself. Then, once more, it was Christmas Eve. Slowly he backed out of the safe and closed it. He touched its grim steel face lightly, almost affectionately, and he left the office.

There he went—in his black overcoat and hat—the same George Mason as a year ago, or was he? He walked a few blocks, then flagged a taxi, anxious not to be late. His nephews were expecting him to help them trim the tree. Afterwards, he was taking his brother and his sister-in-law to a Christmas play. Why was he so happy? So filled with joy? Why did the jostling against other people, laden as he is with packages, exhilarate and delight him? Perhaps the card has something to do with it, the card he taped inside his office safe last New Year's Day. On the card is written, in George Mason's own hand: **“To love people, to be indispensable somewhere, that is the purpose of life. That is the secret of happiness.”**

For a period of some 36 hours, George Mason was locked in a vault with no way out. There was no doorway to freedom, no window, no escape hatch, no road to lead him away from his personal misery and darkness. Just like the people of Isaiah's day, for whom there was no road. They were in a desert wasteland with no water for survival. There was no fertile soil to grow new crops. They were trapped, doomed in a barren place, with no apparent way to be liberated from their bondage.

So in a vivid prophetic oracle, Isaiah tells God's people, *“And a highway will be there.”* A highway that is a road to freedom, a road to joy, a road that would lead the people from their despair. It was a road where there would be joyful singing, one that would lead them to *“everlasting joy.”* Isaiah 35 literally drips with joy. In a desert culture, images of flowing water and lush greenery are signs of good fortune, of blessing and prosperity, and of course of joy. But Isaiah goes overboard, turning the desert into a swamp and the hardy desert grasses into reeds and rushes—river plants. The Sahara looks like the Everglades!

Isaiah also gives us some insight into the nature of joy. Joy is communal; joy is shared and sharable. It helps us reach out and gather up others, particularly those who aren't yet experiencing the joy.

“Strengthen the feeble hands” is a statement designed to help us be with others. It isn't “go strengthen your own feeble hands,” but strengthen the hands of others. And it is an imperative in the Hebrew—indicating that we need to get out there and strengthen someone!

The highway Isaiah speaks of is the same as it was for George Mason. Isaiah declares, *“Say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you”* (35:4). Their way out was opened when there was a change of heart, when God's people began to realize the abiding presence of God and their dependence upon the God who was there all along. When God's people choose to take God's path, a road leads them to *“everlasting joy”* (35:10).

Isaiah gave a unique description of this road: *“And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return”* (35:8-10).

God’s road is for anyone who is feeling trapped or stuck, or without direction. But before that road can be traveled, there must be detachment from the old roads. The old George Mason had to die before the new George Mason could travel his new road. Isaiah’s neighbors had to have their world taken away from them before they could understand the new world that God was creating.

When we lived in southern Beaver County my wife and I frequently drove to Greenville, Pennsylvania where we grew up and where some extended family still lives. We traveled the Beaver Valley Expressway as far as Chippewa Township; but there was no highway between Chippewa and New Castle for over 15 years. Until that section was completed, travelers had to use PA 51 to PA 251 to PA 18 to US 422 to connect to Route 60 that went north to I 80 near Hermitage. Until that section opened, the southern terminus of that part of Route 60 (now designated US 376) had a large “END 60” sign located near the exit. The 16.5 mile \$260 million “missing link” (sounds like a bargain, doesn’t it?) finally opened in 1991. For over 8 years we had no other option but to wiggle around on PA 51 to PA 251 to PA 18 to US 422 and finally to Route 60 to get past New Castle and make our way north to Greenville.

When they finished the highway it was much more pleasant for drivers coming to the airport from Greenville than it was in the past. Like everyone else—whether traveling northbound or southbound—we just had to be patient and take the old winding roads that were there while we anticipated the new road that was being built. But even after that stretch of 16.5 miles opened, I would still take PA 51 to PA 251 to PA 18 to US 422 to Route 60 to avoid paying the tolls for the new road. Imagine that. Why? I’m cheap. It’s that simple.

Looking back on the roads I chose to travel back then, I think our lives are often like that. We want newness, we want the quickest and the best, but we aren’t willing to leave the old ways behind. George Mason was trapped until he rid himself of his indifference and selfishness. Unfortunately it took being locked up in a safe for him to see himself as he really was.

We don’t have to spend two days locked in a safe to travel a new road. There is a new highway for all of us when we are willing to leave our old ones behind. New relationships, new understandings, new opportunities can all be realized when we let go of the old ones which keep us from being fulfilled or experiencing the joy of life, perhaps even the *“everlasting joy.”*

As Isaiah says, *“They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away”* (35:10).

May gladness and joy overtake you, and may sorrow and sighing flee away...

Let us rejoice this day because the Lord is near. Amen. (Thanks to Dr. Keith Wagner for the George Mason story)