

## **“Straight Shot! You Can’t Miss It!”**

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 14, 2025

Third Sunday of Advent – Joy

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might welcome the simplicity of your invitation into joyful righteousness. In the name of the One Coming Into the World we pray, Amen.*

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We’re going to start with a little test today. First, let’s make sure we’re all starting in the same place. When you are about to pull out of our parking lot here at VLM, what direction are you facing? Yes, north. Okay, so let’s imagine we’re in a car. I’ll go slow, and maybe you can picture the actual streets. For simplicity’s sake, just assume all the roads go straight without curves. You pull out of our lot, turning left. Then you turn right and then left again. Turn right and drive straight for a bit, then turn right, and right again, and then finally, left. Now what direction are you facing?

Now for some of you, that was really easy. Some of you are probably just fine at right and left, but north/south/east/west gets a little harder. And then there are people like my sister, who once declared, “I have a sense of direction; it’s just that there’s only one direction: forward!” The prophet Isaiah described this highway in the wilderness, assuring us that “no traveler, not even fools, can go astray.” Have you ever had someone give you directions when you were visiting a place you weren’t familiar with? And they sort of waved their hand a particular way and said something like,

“Once you get on the road, it’s a straight shot! You can’t miss it!” But what if we do miss it? What if that “straight shot” is under construction, or had a new bypass put in? What if the landmark you were told to watch for hasn’t actually been there for eighteen years?

Now I realize this is a dying metaphor, because GPS has taken over and most people just drive where their car tells them to go now. But I would guess there are almost as many stories of GPS failures as there are GPS-users in this room. The point is that sometimes the description of how to get somewhere often sounds a lot simpler than the actual process of going there. Even those with a decent sense of direction can, in fact, sometimes miss it.

Missing it is, of course, even easier when the destination is faithfulness in following Jesus. I’m not sure that man ever walked a straight path in his whole life! Have you ever noticed how often he got interrupted? Can’t you just hear one of the disciples muttering, “Where were we going again?” But in our scriptures today, Jesus and Isaiah seem united in their assertion that if you just look at what’s in front of you, you should be able figure out where to go. “What did you go out to see?” Jesus asks the crowd. John is in prison by now, but surely their memories of going out to see him at the Jordan River haven’t faded yet. “What then did you go out to see?” Jesus seems to be warning us about our tendency to see what we’re looking for, and dismiss what we see if it isn’t what we’re looking for. Thus, the prophet who warned us to repent,

who promised he was preparing the way for the Messiah, which sounded exciting at first, is now in prison. Even John, whom we were told recognized Jesus when he came to the Jordan to be baptized, now seems uncertain if this is the One who was coming. “Can you just ask him to confirm for me,” he instructed his followers. And again, Jesus is telling us to open our eyes and see what we see. Do you see the good news? Do you see the kingdom drawing near? Do you see the healing taking place, the wholeness forming from the rubble, the life emerging from death? You can’t miss it!

But we do, don’t we? Sometimes I wonder what Jesus would do with our AI-infected age, this Messiah repeatedly telling those with ears to hear. How do we follow that supposedly straight path when we can, in fact, no longer trust that what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears is real and true? It used to be that we could assume that AI deepfakes were mostly used for nefarious fear-mongering purposes, such that we would be alerted by the clear agenda of trying to upset us with wild tales of rampant crime and conspiracy theories. But we’re in a whole new, more complicated season now, with heart-warming tales of reunion and redemption going viral, complete with what looks like photographic evidence, that are all, in fact, computer-generated for clicks. Can something truly be wholesome if it is a lie? I, for one, would eagerly testify to the righteous power of fiction. But fiction is not what we’re talking about here. What we’re talking about are narratives posing as stories or reports that simply aren’t clear about whether they’re fiction or fact. Regardless of

their content – which may be off-the-charts heartwarming or inspiring – their primary impact is to confuse the line the between reality and non-reality. They have created a whole new burden for us, that of determining whether we’re being hoodwinked or not, at every turn. Many people have already stopped caring. ‘What does it matter if it came from a series of ones and zeros and not a real person that happened to, if it made me smile?’ Sifting out reality is exhausting, now that the imitations have become so convincing.

I am convinced that one of the blessings of the Light of Christ is that it helps us seek truth. Jesus wants us to testify to what we know to be true because we have witnessed it for ourselves. The hope of Advent cannot be built on simulated statistics. The peace of Advent cannot be grounded in invented stories of children being fed when so many real children are starving. The joy of Advent is not a cheap laugh but a deep appreciation for the ways that the realm of God’s righteousness is actually breaking through into our world. We need to carefully guard our capacity for teasing out the truth. Too much exposure to supposedly harmless AI-generated content will blur our vision in ways we may not be aware of till it’s too late. If we’re going to follow Jesus, our landmarks need to be the places where healing truly happened, the testimonies of liberation that come from those who experienced it first-hand. If we want to live with authentic joy, we need to safeguard truth, to uphold it, cherish it, protect it. We need to teach our children, not just that lying is bad, but why it’s bad;

how it damages trust and relationships and community. We need to insist that the minimum standard for leadership is honesty. We need to examine the habits of our own minds, checking to ensure we're not only seeing what we want to see or expect to see, but what is actually happening.

So many of our cries for salvation are pleas to God to make faithfulness easier. Isaiah imagines a highway with no turns, no forks, no distractions or interruptions. The hymn writer pleads, "let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee." But Jesus challenges us to take on the responsibility of seeing clearly. Make the effort; look around. Seek out the true stories of redemption and healing. Ground your joy in what is real. Trust that something good is coming, not because computer-generated content anesthetized your worries, but because you've gotten involved in bringing that something good to life. It can be a pretty straight shot. But we could, in fact, miss it, if we're not careful. The path will be clearer if we make sure it is illuminated by the truth-revealing Light of Christ. Hallelujah and Amen.