

"Dead Ends – that Aren't"

Text: Isaiah 43:16-21

"May the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you." Amen. (1 Peter 5:10)

Dear Fellow Christians, word-nerds find inordinate satisfaction when they (we) discover etymologies for words or expressions that add hidden texture and meaning. The word "muscle," for example, is from the Latin word for "little mouse" – a colorful picture of what muscle tissue looks like under the skin. "Disaster" is a combination of "dis" (bad, disagreeable) and "aster" (star) which reflected the idea that bad things in life were a result of the disagreeable alignment of the stars. The word "clouds" literally meant "sky rocks."

So also the word "deadline" always seemed overly dramatic – until I learned its history. A teacher, for example, would announce a "deadline" for handing in a paper, and in my youthful smarminess I thought the implied penalty a bit harsh. Imagine my delight to learn, when touring the notorious Civil War prison camp in Andersonville, GA, that "deadline" referred to the edge of the 19-foot buffer inside of the stockade walls. If a prisoner crossed that "deadline" into the 19-foot open area, he was immediately shot by the prison guards.

I was therefore most hopeful to find a similar explanation for the equally dramatic expression that forms part of the sermon title this morning: "dead end". Surely the term must carry some historic lethality when first coined, as perhaps referring to a road from which travelers never returned. What disappointment to learn "dead end" was first used by English plumbers in the 1800's to describe a capped-off water pipe that went nowhere.

Despite the anticlimactic setback, we examine "dead-ends" this morning on the basis of our text – more specifically, *"Dead Ends that aren't."* The text that will carry us down this path this morning is found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, the 43rd Chapter:

^{ESV} Isaiah 43:16-21 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild beasts

will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

This is God's Word. There is great comfort in knowing that these words are true and right in every regard. They are also therefore worthy of our careful study and meditation. That we might gain the full benefit of these words through our study this morning, so we pray, **"Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

The history of the Jews was, in a sense, one of paths which routinely appeared to be dead ends. God started the nation with Abraham and led him and his family to the south, to the Promised Land. When famine seemed to end their time there, God led them on another path to the south, to Egypt – again another apparent dead end as they were enslaved there for 400 years.

It is there that our text picks up the story. Our text first refers to the time when, having created for them that impossible path out of slavery (not only with all their possessions but with the plunder of Egypt), they found themselves on what by all appearances looked to be another dead end. A *deadly* end. Not only was the mighty Egyptian army bearing down on them – clearly displeased with the Jews for the devastation their God had visited upon them – the Jews had nothing with which to defend themselves. For the past 400 years they had enjoyed no Second Amendment rights. They were sheep, penned for the slaughter. Or so it appeared.

But *God's* path is never a path to nowhere. Despite all appearances to the contrary, it is never a dead end. It's always a path home. Walking on God's path is always a guarantee both of his divine favor and his divine protection. But walking that path requires trust in the one who laid it out. This was the lesson the newly freed Jews needed to learn, which was exactly why God's path had led to that impossible, inescapable catastrophe-waiting-to-happen by the shores of the Red Sea. God's people needed to learn to doubt their eyes and trust their God.

Only when the Children of Israel were absolutely convinced that all was lost did God himself show them the new path. Only when he had sounded the depths of their trust did he reveal that he does not lead his people into dead ends. In this case, God's path not only meant escape and freedom for his people but death and destruction for his enemies.

This was the premise that God the Holy Spirit, speaking through Isaiah, wanted to establish in our text. This was the validation for what came next. In other words, the same God who had revealed his power to make a path of escape where none previously existed, where no one ever thought possible, that God was and is able to repeat that power in every possible circumstance for every single one of his children. In fact it formed the basis or authority for what he was about to tell them. His message was this: *Don't look for the logical path, the old path, the well-worn path. My paths will be different. Learn to trust me.*"

But the Jews proved, repeatedly, that they weren't ready to trust God's direction. They hadn't learned to trust him, especially when their eyes saw only dead ends. So God tested them. He taught them to trust him for food and water in the wilderness, and then led them through that wilderness to another apparent dead end – to the borders of the land he had promised to give them. The spies went in, the spies came out, and 83% of them reported that they had been led to yet another dead end. The people that occupied the land were just too strong. Too formidable. Too... everything. Two of the twelve spies saw the same things the others saw. Their reaction was not *"Woe is us!"* but *"Lucky us!"* They didn't focus on the negative; they saw only the positive. They saw no obstacle, no dead end, only the incredible land the Lord had promised to give them. Eyes lie. God doesn't.

As you are aware, the deadenders won. The people turned away without even trying, without even giving their God a chance to prove himself reliable – despite the fact that he had repeatedly proved that he was. So that same Lord gave them a very different path, and this time their new path truly was a path to nowhere, a bona fide dead end. He led them back into the wilderness on a path that would wander aimlessly for forty years until every last adult doubter was dead. Every adult who, even with all that they had witnessed, still didn't trust that their God loved them enough, or was powerful enough, to guide them safely and reliably.

Yet it's probably not accurate to say that God led *Israel* on this path to nowhere. That path was for the *Jews*. We rightly recognize "Israel" as a subset of the Jews, made up of those Jews who actually trusted their God and clung tenaciously to his promises. Why is this a necessary distinction? Because you and I are now part of "Israel."

With the doubters all dead, God's path led again to that seemingly impenetrable border, to that same apparent dead end. This time, though the defenders were still just as formidable and the cities just as heavily

fortified, Israel followed God's path into a rich land all their own. City by city they came into possession of "a land flowing with milk and honey."

Carry this all forward a couple thousand years and you will find that not much has changed. God has established a new "Israel," and you and I are part of it. Paul spoke of this in his Letter to the Romans: ***Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; ²⁷ "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."*** (Romans 11:25-27) "Israel" now includes the sum total of all believers, all who will be saved, all who trust the promises of God rather than their own senses or human reason. Human ideas represent a dead end, both then and now.

Note also that the "Israel" of today (of which we are members) is often put to the same test as the Jews of the Old Testament. The path our God lays out before us routinely runs into what are, by all appearances, dead ends. God's path regularly leads to apparent catastrophe and inescapable calamity. Ask anyone who has been hopelessly in love with an avowed unbeliever. Ask anyone who has faced "unavoidable" financial ruin. Ask anyone who has come face-to-face with "irreparable" or "irreconcilable" marriage problems, "impossible" family crises, depression, anxiety, or incurable disease.

These are our unscalable walls and our undefeatable enemies. These are our unstoppable, rushing enemy armies. The vast host of the godless lie not only arrayed in front of us, they are all around us. In our case the path laid out by our God is not simply to destroy them but to win them over. Who would ever imagine that such a thing could be done? Who could possibly sum up the courage to put one foot in front of another along such a path, to continue to walk toward such seemingly impenetrable walls?

These are our tests. These are our blind, impossible paths. We are surrounded by those who are walking purposely on a path to nowhere. A path to *somewhere*, actually, but certainly not the destination they envision.

Again, who can possibly pass such tests or meet such challenges? Who can ever learn to ignore his senses, and step forward? Blindly. Boldly.

That's where the second half of our text comes in. Hear again *God's* words – the same God who "***makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.***" The God who therefore has already repeatedly demonstrated his power to steer his children through impossible barriers and to guide us safely where we never imagined we could venture has already given us every reason to trust him. Hear what *that* God says: "***Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old.*** ¹⁹ ***Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"***

This is the promise of the very gospel itself – the greatest deliverance from impossible circumstances that the world has ever known. The enraged host of our own sins once pressed us, enslaved us, imperiled us, condemned us. There was simply no way out, for "***all we like sheep had gone astray***" and we were assured by God himself that "***the soul that sins shall die.***" No possible escape. An eternal dead end. Until God revealed a solution we could never have imagined. God's escape came in the form of his Son, who described himself as "***the way, the truth, and the life.***" His Word, the Scriptures, point always and only there, to Jesus. "*There is your new path. There is your deliverance from the enemies against which you were powerless. As I once rescued Israel from the Army of Egypt, so I have provided you a path to safety and life through faith in Jesus Christ.*"

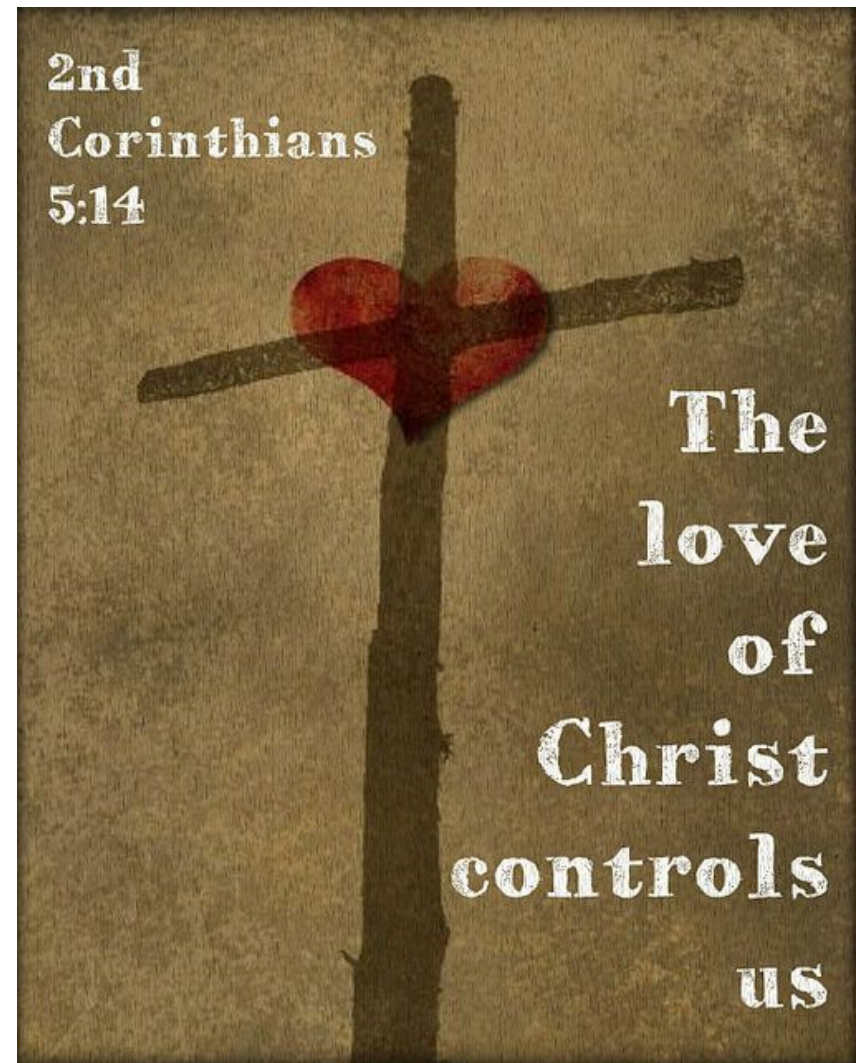
How impossibly easy, where once there was no hope. As the waters of the Red Sea once parted, so also a path to freedom and life has been opened to us. God the Father has laid on Jesus Christ the iniquity of us all. Through faith in his Son, you and I have already been declared not guilty. The danger has passed. Our sins can no longer condemn or threaten us. Their power over us lies broken, never again to rise, just like that mighty Egyptian army.

Who could have imagined an escape so simple, so painless – at least for those who were rescued? Only the God with whom all things are possible. That's the God that can be trusted – trusted to never lead you into a dead end. As you trust that he has already solved your sin problem, trust him to provide an escape from every apparent dead end when you walk where he directs. Amen.

ESV **Philippians 3:8-14** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-- ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² ¶ Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

ESV **Luke 20:9-20** And he began to tell the people this parable: "A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. ¹⁰ When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. ¹¹ And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. ¹² And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. ¹³ Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' ¹⁴ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.' ¹⁵ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? ¹⁶ He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others." When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" ¹⁷ But he looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? ¹⁸ Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." ¹⁹ ¶ The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them, but they feared the people. ²⁰ So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor.

ESV **Isaiah 43:16-21** Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.



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The Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 6, 2025

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 131 (Blue Hymnal)

"Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 1ff. (Blue Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Philippians 3:8-14) Our first reading is another of those clear, precise explanations of the gospel – and how that good news makes Christianity different from every other religion in the world. No other religion proclaims salvation on the basis of what someone else has done, rather than through what the individual himself must do. When Paul was given this truth, every other idea became worthless to him.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 51 (Blue Hymnal Page 75)

The Second Lesson: (Luke 20:9-20) Jesus here uses a parable to illustrate how the Jews had continually rejected the prophets, and would also soon reject Him as God's Son. We are not immune from the temptation to reject God's Word when it tells us what our sinful flesh does not want to hear. We are supposed to learn from the dishonorable actions of others, not copy them. Their end is destruction.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Blue Hymnal page 5)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 680 (Blue Hymnal)

"God of Grace and God of Glory"

The Sermon – Text: Isaiah 43:16-21 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Dead Ends – That Aren't"

The Offertory – (Blue Hymnal page 7)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 436

"Not What My Hands Have Done"

The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 147 (Stanzas 1 & 4) (Blue Hymnal)

"God, We Praise You"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

Attendance – Sunday (53) Average (40) Wednesday (24)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Final Midweek Lenten Service
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Pastor Paul Krause has returned the call to Faith of St. Louis, MO. Pastor Thomas Schuetze has returned the call to St. Stephen of Mountain View, CA. Pastor Paul Tiefel has announced his pending retirement, scheduled for mid-August.

Lenten Services – Our final Midweek Lenten Services is scheduled for this Wednesday at 7:00 pm.

Holy Week Schedule – Holy Week begins one week from today, with our Palm Sunday service, and continues with our Maundy Thursday communion service and our Good Friday commemoration, both beginning at 7pm. As is our custom, Holy Communion will next be celebrated on Maundy Thursday rather than next Sunday.

Church Picture Reminder – As part of the Easter "Care Baskets" for our shut-ins, we will be taking a congregational picture after the service this morning.

New Hymnal – Two reminders. First, that all of the information on the hymn boards refers to hymns and page numbers in the new blue hymnal. Second, see the sheet on the mailbox table if you would like to order additional copies for home use. Please also note on that sheet if you have already taken a copy (or copies) home with you so that we know how many more we need to order.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet next Sunday during the fellowship hour.