The Funeral of Roger Yarbrough – January 25, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Isaiah 40:1-5, Matthew 11:28-30 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Michelle, Lee, Amy, family and friends of Roger, sisters and brothers in Christ: grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." That famous verse from Isaiah 40 may seem a little out of place at a funeral. We were looking, though, for a Bible reading that connected in some way to Roger's career in highway construction. And as you might imagine, there aren't a lot of those. But this one stands out, because together with the other four verses of the reading it manages to cover two of the three tasks before us today. We are here to remember and give thanks to God for the life of Roger Yarbrough, to be comforted in the midst of our grief and sadness at his passing, and to comment Roger into the eternal care of his creator and redeemer.

The first of those tasks is the one not touched upon by the reading, remembering and giving thanks. And there is lot to remember in Roger's almost 96 years of life. Each of you knows a part of that story from your own contact with him over the years. But I wonder how many of you, aside from his children, know the breadth and depth of his life as laid out in the shorter obituary there in your bulletin, or the longer obituary that appeared in the local paper. Roger managed to pack a lot into the years that were given to him, and he shared his time, his talent, and the fruits of his success with many people and organizations over the years, not least of which was the church. He told me early on in our acquaintance of his part in building the current building of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Urbana, which he remembered with fondness. And from other longtime members here, some of whom came over to Grace with Roger and Dolores, I learned of his many years of active participation in the leadership of this congregation. Even after he and Dolores were no longer able regularly to attend services, he continued to help out, serving as a consultant to the property committee when repairs to the parking lot needed to be made a few years back. I did not know Roger in the earlier years of his active involvement, but I think I got a glimpse of that when he came over on several occasions to inspect the damaged concrete and offer his advice on how best to proceed with the repair. And I have to say that in the time I knew him, I don't think I ever saw him happier than when he was engaged in that task.

The other thing that stood out to me about Roger in the last decade of his life was his devotion to Dolores. A lot of his energy and attention was given to looking after her, which necessarily took him away from other things he might have done with those years. His faithfulness in caring for his wife through those difficult years after her stroke was heartwarming and inspiring, surely a reflection of his trust in God's faithfulness to him through good times and bad.

But as I have already said, each of us has experienced only a part of Roger's story. And I expect that even those of you who know a very large part of his story will still be learning new things in the mutual remembering of these days, that is if my experience of my own father's death ten months ago is any indication. The full story of Roger's life, of course, is known only to God.

And that is where our text becomes relevant. Isaiah 40 is the beginning of the last part of the book of Isaiah, which announces the end of Israel's captivity in Babylon and the promise of a return home. Israel's story up to that point was not, on balance, a good one. It was full of unfaithfulness to God and injustice toward one another. But God had claimed them as God's own

people, and promised them a better future, and it is not in God's nature to give up on those whom God has claimed. So, now after 40 years in captivity God was opening up for them a new way forward. "Comfort" is the first word out of Isaiah's mouth and pen in the new day that was dawning for the People of Israel. Their past was now behind them, their transgressions forgiven.

Comfort is also the word for us today. Because, you see, in Holy Baptism, God also claimed Roger as God's own child. And did I mention that God does not give up on those whom God has claimed? Being baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means that death no longer has the final word for Roger, and that a new day is dawning for him also.

And that is why we are able to undertake the final task before us in this service, to commend Roger into the care of the one who has claimed him. We can let go, confident that God has gathered him safely into God's embrace.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." For the people of Israel, that vision of a highway through the desert was a powerful image of the shortest and quickest way back home to a new life and a new future. I gotta think that that image would appeal to Roger the highway builder, and put a smile on his face as he sets out on his journey home to new life and a new future.

May we too find comfort and hope in that image, for Roger and for us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.