

Second Sunday in Advent  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

6 December 2020

When I was about 13 years old I got lost in a tunnel with a group of friends. We were on a school trip to a set of famous caves about three hours from home. At some point three of my buddies and I were separated from the group and the tour guides. At first, it was a lot of fun. We were free to wander without the constraints of a guide. But, after a while, fear began to set in. Every turn led to more darkness; every opening that looked like an exit actually led us deeper into the tunnel; and every small sound felt dangerous and terrifying. To make the situation worse, one of our peers would not stop a running commentary. He would say, "That guide told us there were bears in this cave. I wonder if bears eat humans? Man, we are getting more and more lost. The bus is going to leave without us! This is all our fault. We should not have wandered off. We are so stupid. I wonder what kind of bears they have in these caves..." He just would not stop. I don't remember what was worse, being lost and far away from home or his commentary.

After being lost for about 2 hours, our hungry and terrified buddies just needed a rest, so we seated down to catch our breath. One of our peers said, "Let us sing!" We all looked at him like he was nuts. "What if the bears hear us and know where we are?" one of us protested. He insisted, "Maybe those looking for us will hear us and know where we are." We began to sing a popular Church song at the time, "Con vosotros esta y no le conoceis, con vosotros esta, su nombre es el Señor" (He is with you and you don't know him, he is with you and his name is "Lord".) We repeated the refrain several times when, suddenly, we began to hear steps approaching us from all directions. And, as our friends heard our song, they themselves began to join us. We followed their voice and they ours, until we met and found our way out together.

Today, we have two different stories in Holy Scripture that speak of the reality of being lost. The first is the people of God in the exile in Babylon around the year 540 before Christ. They are in the darkness of captivity, they have lost their country, their temple, their homes and their farms. Many of the first generation to come from Israel have died in captivity and now the people of God wonder if God is done with them. Many of the prophets have preached a message of condemnation, which sounded like my friend's commentary. This was language of judgement. These prophets reminded the people of their idolatry, betrayal of God, failure to follow the commandments, and neglect of the needs of the poor, the stranger, the orphan, and the alien.

The other story is that of Mark's community in Rome around the year 70. I told you about their problems last week. They are being persecuted by the Romans because of the fires of AD 64, and some have been recruited by insurrectionists fighting the Romans in the desert. We know that the Romans are crushing this insurrection in a savage way, killing thousands. This savage response leads them to

destroy the temple forever. The house churches in Rome wonder if God has given up on his people. They wonder if they will make it out of this terrible situation. They are killed at home and in Rome. They are being killed everywhere! To make matters worse, many of the faithful are beginning to have doubts. Jesus was supposed to return within a generation, but this is the year 70 and more than 40 years have passed. Some feel he will never return. He has abandoned them. They are alone and forsaken. They know this too could be their fault. Maybe they misread the signs. Maybe they failed to live according to Jesus' commands. Maybe they are done as a chosen people.

Today, we see how God acted in each of these situations of lostness. Isaiah, chapter 40, stands out as an explosion of light in the midst of great darkness. At a point when most of the prophets were preaching condemnation, Isaiah 40 is a song of grace that tells Israel that God is not done with them yet. Their penalty is paid. God himself will come to the rescue of his people. God himself will create a highway in the desert to bring his people back from slavery into freedom. God loves his people and he will go through any extent to rescue them. This is a message of comfort and hope.

Now, to Mark's community. Imagine a group of dispirited disciples, meeting under the cover of night, afraid for their lives, filled with sadness over the loss of loved ones, and overwhelmed with concern over the wellbeing of their families, then in the middle of this darkness, a young man stands up and announces, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then Mark quotes from Isaiah, Chapter 40, the same text we read today. Mark shows his people that the Gospel of Jesus is good news for those who are in darkness. There is a new beginning promised to those who have accepted the Messiah. God is not done with his people. There is Good News for those in darkness. Even if they are suffering, God is with them and God will see them through the current crisis. God himself has come down in the person of the Messiah. There is nothing beyond the touch of his grace. The one who prepares the way has come to preach a baptism of repentance. The prophesy from Isaiah has been fulfilled. God has come in human form, choosing to rescue his people from within. This is great news!

This brings us to today. Many of us are lost. It may be the lostness of anger and bitterness, the lostness of addiction, the lostness of broken marriages and divorce, the lostness of exhaustion and isolation because of the Pandemic, or the lostness of spiritual dryness or doubt. It does not matter what our particular lostness is. We all stand naked and vulnerable in the presence of our God and from time to time we all wonder if God has given up on us. I am here to tell you, Messiah is coming. There is a pregnant girl about to deliver a baby boy and this little baby will be the salvation of our world. This little baby will bring hope to a world in desperate need of hope, a world engulfed in the darkness of self-sufficiency and individualism. This little baby boy will be the clearest reminder that God is among us because he is on the side of humanity. This baby boy will come to us soon and will inaugurate the greatest rescue mission in the history of the world.

If you are in the tunnel today, don't despair! God sees you, he knows where you are, and he is on the move. He is searching for you even now. He has not given up. He will never give up. You are too precious to him. He knows you need to be found and he will do the finding. This is his vocation. The plain and simple truth is that Christ Jesus came into the world to find and save sinners. Have hope! Today, let me give you a word of comfort. Let me sing tenderly to you. Let me tell you that you are loved! You are the image bearer. You are God's precious treasure and he loves you. Your salvation is near. Your delivery has been guaranteed! Give praise to God in heaven that he has remembered his people and has sent us such a mighty Savior,

May God find you in your lostness and may he bring liberation and joy into your life. Amen!