

Church of the Divine Love

Sermon second Sunday of Advent, December 6th, 2020

Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3: 8-15a; Mark 1: 1-8

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

Have you ever felt out of place, or that you just were not in a good place, or like your life had been uprooted? Have you ever felt disconnected in your marriage, family, or other relationship? That's about displacement. Have you felt homeless even though you had a home? Those are forms of displacement. If your life has ever been uprooted and left, you are feeling like you occupy space but are not really grounded then you know what it is to be a displaced person. Are you always looking for the next thing that will fix your life? If you can't get comfortable in your own skin, then you might know what it's like to be displaced. So, let me ask you this. In what ways are you living as a displaced person? What parts of your life feel uprooted and disconnected? What is your displacement?

"Comfort, O comfort my people," are God's words to displaced people. Isaiah first spoke those words to people exiled in Babylon, people whose lives had been uprooted. Those same words come to the displaced people of God today. In some way the prophetic word is always directed to displaced people. And we long to hear those words of comfort. We want to find our place. More than anything displaced people want to be a placed people. But if you listen to John the Baptist in today's gospel (Mark 1:1-8) the way home, the way of becoming a placed people, is always through the wilderness. There is no way around the wilderness. You can't get out of it. You can only go through it.

We so often have an image of the wilderness as empty, barren, and desolate; a place of demons and temptations; a place where the best you can hope for is to survive. But what if we've got it wrong? What if the wilderness is really a place of life, a place of hope, a place of connectedness, a place of finding ourselves and our place? In St. Mark's account of the gospel the wilderness is so much more than a testing ground for God's people or a place of exile. The spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness after his baptism and, yes, he faces temptation. But the wilderness is also the place where the angels waited on him. It seems that where there are temptations there are also ministering angels. Mark reminds us that Jesus often went to the wilderness by himself to pray, to encounter the Father. The wilderness then is a place of connection to the sacred. It is also a place of rest. Don't you remember that Jesus took his disciples to that quiet desolate place to rest? So if we think that the wilderness is this place of emptiness and barrenness, a place bereft of life, growth, and hope, a place of hunger and abandonment then we have misunderstood and forgotten that it is a place of prayer, a place of rest, a place of feeding, a place where angels minister to us. The wilderness is the place where we begin to become placed people, residents and connected. Isn't that what we want? I do. I want that for you, for me, for the world. I want us to have a sense of depth and rootedness, a sense of connection to ourselves and one another. I think that's what people of Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside understood. That's what they heard in John's cry, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. "

Something about John's voice, something about his message, something about the wilderness, said to them, there is more for you than you have now. There is a place for you. But you will only find it in the wilderness. Every movement to the wilderness, that place of where the angels minister to us, that place of prayer, that place of rest, that place of feeding, is an act of repentance. It means change your

thinking, change the way you think, change your mind, have a new mentality, the mentality of the kingdom of God. What if John's call for repentance is the movement from being displaced to being placed, a move from occupying a space to taking up residence, a move from being a visitor to becoming a resident, a move from being ungrounded to rooted in depth.

The wilderness I'm talking about is not the geography around us but the geography within us. It is an interior landscape. There is nowhere to hide in the wilderness. There are no illusions or distractions. The wilderness strips us of all pretense, and we are left to face up to ourselves, to examine our hearts, and confess the truth about our lives. This wilderness isn't so much a place of exile or punishment as it is a place of self-discovery. We discover that we can no longer live by our own self-sufficiency. In the wilderness we ultimately discover that we are in need and have nowhere else to turn but to the one we are waiting for in this season of Advent.

Advent season is an invitation to set your mind off the stresses of the year. We can take our focus off of the crazy hustle of the season and the sadness that could accompany the different ways some of us may be choosing to observe the holiday season this year. Even when things feel chaotic, we can find peace in Jesus. Advent is a chance to focus our thoughts on the gift God has given us in his son Jesus who stepped down from heaven and took the form of a man so that we might believe.

Christmas will lack its full meaning if we do not prepare in our own hearts a way for the Lord. It is in our hearts that we need to make a straight highway for God. It is the valleys of sin in our own hearts that are to be filled with God's mercy and healing, and the mountains and hills of pride in our own hearts that are to become low. Our readings also show us that waiting is not a passive action. We are to live out our hope. In waiting for the fullness of the Kingdom of God, we proclaim God's message of justice. We name sin. We turn toward justice. We stand in the wilderness, pointing to the one more powerful than us. As the psalmist writes, "Righteousness shall go before him, and peace shall be a pathway for his feet." Where righteousness and peace are actively enacted, God is there. We stand in the wilderness and welcome all to journey with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. We point to something better. We point to the Christ, the one who is more powerful, more patient, and more loving. We point to the Christ, the one who is to come.

This Advent, many of us are already in the wilderness. Let us step back and pray for a glimpse of the divine and cosmic perspective. We remember that all things here on earth are temporary and ephemeral, and we work to embody God's patience and love here in this world. Let our lives be shaped by our hope in the truth that God is coming. As our collect says, let us live in such a way so that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

Amen.

