

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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12/7/08

“You Can Go Home Again”

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

[2] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

[3] A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[4] Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

[5] Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

[6] A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

[7] The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

[8] The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

[9] Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

[10] See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

[11] He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

[2] As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

[3] the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,' "

[4] John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [5] And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. [6] Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. [7] He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. [8] I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

THE WILDERNESS

Today's lesson begins where many of us live, in the wilderness.

The wilderness is that place where cell phones don't work (even Verizon) and we are hopelessly lost. The wilderness is that place where there is not enough food and water to go around. The wilderness is that place where there are no roads.

The wilderness is real place. It is a dangerous wasteland that you can point out on a map. But, the wilderness is also a state of mind. Everyone here knows what I mean.

A husband or wife decides that they want a divorce, and immediately you find yourself in the wilderness. A spouse dies, and once again you find yourself in the wilderness. You lose a job and have no prospects for new one. You're in the wilderness. For no reason at all a great sadness comes into your life. Some say you're depressed. I would call it the wilderness.

The wilderness is that place where there are no familiar landmarks. The wilderness is that place where the comforts of home seem far away. You feel like a stranger in a strange land.

I don't have to talk much about the wilderness this morning. I don't have to describe in detail what it means to lose everything and not know where to turn. Almost everyone here today has been there and done that.

And perhaps you may even find yourself in the wilderness today. Maybe you have even come to church hoping that someone ... maybe even this preacher has some idea about how to get out of this terrible place called the wilderness.

WALKING THE CURVES

The answer for those lost in the wilderness is indeed contained in our text for today. But, I must take care lest I convey the mistaken idea that the answer is easy or straightforward because it's not. The way out of the wilderness is always a winding road.

At Presbytery this past Monday the preacher told of developing a labyrinth at the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina. A labyrinth is twisting, turning path that is used in meditation. It was meant to be a way to help pilgrims at this retreat center focus on God's grace.

The preacher said that his young son helped him build this labyrinth and after it was finished the little boy carefully walked the path. And then he went back to the starting point, said a brief prayer and walked straight to the finishing point without walking through any of the curves.

When the father asked why he had done that, the little boy told his dad, "You know some people think that this is how we reach God, that we say a prayer and go directly to him. But, I think that if you're going to go to God sometimes you have to walk the curves."

The wilderness is about walking the curves. The wilderness is that time when we realize that the path back home is not always the straight superhighway that we would like it to be. Sometimes the path back home is long and winding. And sometimes we wonder if we will ever make it back home.

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

The author Thomas Wolfe was pessimistic about coming home. He famously wrote a book entitled, "You Can't Go Home Again." And there is some truth to that. We can remember with great joy and longing the ghost of Christmases past, but that is a home that we will never be able to visit again.

One of the most poignant songs I know was written during World War II. "I'll be home for Christmas." But, then the song ends "if only in my dreams."

Home was not an option for those who were in the service during World War II. There was a terrible job that had to be done, and some who sang that song would never make it back home again.

And even those who made it home would be changed by their experiences forever. They would make a new home, but the old home that they remembered would, as the song suggests, just be the home of their dreams.

But, despite all that I would like to take issue with Thomas Wolfe this morning. I think it is possible to go home again. I think it is possible to find salvation in the wilderness. I think that even the greatest tragedy can be overcome.

But, we cannot go home by traveling around the wilderness or ignoring the wilderness. We cannot go home and expect everything to be like it was before.

The way back home involves a harrowing journey that is filled with great uncertainty. The way back home is a journey that requires us to risk everything on the proposition that God loves and cares for us every step of the way ... even when we walk the curves of life.

WORDS THAT ESTABLISH A NEW REALITY

The way back home is found in the highway that God provides in the wilderness. The way back home is not found by trusting in what we can do for ourselves but instead in trusting what God promises to do for us. It is a time when we walk by faith and not by sight.

In other words, in order to make that trip back home it is necessary to believe that the trip is possible. It is necessary to believe that God loves us and forgives us and has a plan for our life that will not be derailed by the curves.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman wrote that the poetic speech of the prophet is a word of comfort that defies logic and establishes a new reality. To put it in the words of our text for today, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8, NRSV)

In other words, we are not defined by the wilderness that surrounds us or the weakness that disables us. We are defined by God's word of promise and power.

This past week a good example of this biblical principle came to me. A person asked me to pray for a friend, a missionary who was undergoing dialysis. She sent me an e-mail that detailed his plight.

This young man had lost a lot due to his illness. He was no longer able to serve on the mission field. He had watched many who took treatment with him grow weaker and weaker. Some had even died. And he knew that his own strength was steadily ebbing away.

He felt helpless and isolated by his illness, and this soon led to depression. But, he was also encouraged by the heroic efforts of the health care workers who sought to help him and so he decided to do something positive.

He led a support group for other patients who were coming into dialysis. He helped them adjust to the new routine, but he also did something else, something simple that was surprisingly effective.

He asked them to talk about what they had done in life.

They talked about sports and their faith and their hobbies ... whatever was important to them. And by doing that, they found common ground and a new joy. They were no longer defined solely by the illness that threatened to take their life.

And this young man found a renewed sense of purpose and hope in the middle of his personal wilderness.

NOT DEFINED BY THE WILDERNESS

Often we define a person by their wilderness or their captivity. We define people by their illness or their disability or their age or their weakness or some tragedy that has occurred in their life.

But, Isaiah tells us that God has come with good news. God has come with a word of comfort. We are no longer captives. We are more than our problems. God has said it, and that makes it so. When God speaks things change. When God speaks salvation comes into the world. The One whose powerful word spoke the universe into existence can make us into a new creation as well.

The wilderness does not define us. Instead the wilderness is the starting point for a new day. God is going to build a superhighway in the middle of our desert. What is impossible with men and women is not too hard for the God.

So how does this happen? What do we need to do? First, we need to believe in God's power more than we believe in our weakness.

A WORD FOR EXILES

Isaiah's prophecy was originally written to God's people who had been exiled into Babylon. These were a people who had truly lost everything.

Many of their relatives had been killed in battle. The temple in Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed. They had spent many years in Babylon and in their old age they never expected to see home again.

When you think about it, why would they even want to go back home? Home as they remembered it no longer existed.

More than that, their children had become accustomed to the ways of Babylon. They had made a new home in this foreign land. Their grandchildren didn't even know how to speak the language of faith.

To sum it up, this was about as hopeless a situation as you can imagine. If they would ever see the Promised Land, their home again it would only be in their dreams.

And yet God said, “Shout the good news from the mountaintop. There is no need to be afraid. God is coming to save you. God is coming to lead you home.”

THE MESSAGE OF ADVENT

Does this message sound familiar? It should.

God comes to take us home. This is the message of Advent.

And that same message is found in our New Testament lesson for today as well. Mark begins the story of Jesus in the wilderness. And in the wilderness a man named John is encouraging people to repent and be baptized.

The people have not seen anyone like John in a long time. To us he sounds very strange with his camel hair coat, leather belt and his very unappetizing diet of locusts and wild honey.

But, for the people of John’s day he must have looked a lot like another man of the desert, the great prophet Elijah. (Elijah you’ll remember was supposed to come again before the Messiah would appear.)

And so what seems odd to us was very familiar and comforting to this ancient people. For many years there had been no voice that offered hope in the wilderness of despair. Now the voice was heard again. It reminded the people of that prophecy spoken long ago by the prophet Isaiah.

John was preparing the way of the Lord. John was getting people ready for a new day through his message of repentance.

THE GOOD NEWS OF REPENTANCE

I think we have the wrong idea about John. We often portray him as this crazy street preacher who is very judgmental in his call to repent. We hear him say, “Repent now before it is too late” as he points his long boney finger at the crowd that is gathered.

Now I’ll have to admit that there is some of that in John. In the other gospels the judgment is much more pronounced. But, in Mark’s gospel it is clear that the message is not so much about judgment but about hope. Why would (as Mark puts it) all the people from the surrounding countryside and all the people of Jerusalem go out to hear John if his message were solely about judgment?

John’s call to repentance in the wilderness was a call to hope. Repentance doesn’t mean that we wallow in our guilt and continue to judge ourselves for past sins. Repentance means to hear the call of the prophet. Isaiah said, “Your sins are forgiven. Now is the time for you to go in a different direction. Now is the time for you to take the road back home. God has already prepared the way.”

Repentance simply means to go in a different direction.

I think the best example of repentance is seen in the story of the prodigal son. The Bible tells us that the prodigal son “came to himself” and decided to go back home.

Yes, a lot of water had gone under the bridge since the prodigal left home. He had alienated his brother and broken the heart of his loving father.

But, the prodigal son realized that being a servant in the house of his father was much better than living as he was now ... and so he decided to go back home.

A PLEA FROM THE PASTOR

My toughest job as a pastor is getting people to believe that going home is possible. Let me try once again.

No matter what has happened in your life and no matter how far you have traveled from your heavenly Father, you can go home again.

You can find a sense of peace and purpose and forgiveness. You can be healed. You can go to a place where you will be seen as a child of the King, a person of worth.

You can go home for Christmas.

And the first step in the journey begins with Isaiah and John. They tell us that sins can be forgiven. They tell us that the voice of hope is first spoken in the desolate wilderness. God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

One of the authors that I read this past week talked about the fact that not long ago he was in the wilderness. He didn't feel worthy to take communion. For months he was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and shame. He said that he still went to church. He read the liturgy, sang the hymns and listened intently to the sermons. He was hoping for some word of hope, some answer that would change things.

But, he was disappointed. He wrote,

“Often I choked back the tears as I sat in silence while the rest of the congregation went forward. I feared going forward, scared that I would have some kind of emotional breakdown and create a terrible, emotional scene in front of the whole congregation. Sometimes I just left the sanctuary before communion and sat in the car while my boys finished Sunday school.

The work of lowering the mountains of my pride and raising the valleys of my despair took weeks. Then one Sunday, I finally felt like I could take communion again.

As I listened to the Gospel lesson, which was the parable of the lost sheep, it just dawned on me that God was searching for me just like the shepherd looked for the one lost sheep. I don't know why it dawned on me that Sunday. I don't know why 6 months of participating in liturgy and hearing good sermons didn't make it happen sooner. It just happened that Sunday, and I could go forward and receive communion again.

God wasn't any different that day; perhaps I had finally done the internal work of preparing the way."

Do you feel estranged from God and the ones you love? Do you feel an overwhelming sense of guilt? The same God who called the Israelites home from exile is calling you home today. There is a voice crying in your wilderness. And that voice is crying come home.

AN INVITATION TO THE TABLE OF GRACE

Today the Lord invites you to eat at his table. This is not a meal for the righteous. This is meal for sinners who want to come home.

Remember the disciples who first took that meal? They took it we are told "on the same night" that Jesus was betrayed. Jesus was not only betrayed by Judas. He was betrayed by all of those first disciples. Peter denied him. The others ran away.

But, even in the midst of betrayal, Jesus was laying the foundation for salvation. He gave them a meal in which he proclaimed, "This is my body which is broken for you. This is my blood which is shed for you."

In other words what those disciples could not do for themselves, Jesus did for them. He forgave them and made it possible for them to one day come back home.

What Jesus did for them, he does for us as well. We can repent. We can decide to go in a different direction. We can decide to leave the wilderness of our current life and go back home.

But, in the final analysis, only the power of God can make that dream a reality. Only God can prepare a road in the wilderness. Only God can save us from our guilt and sin. Only God in Christ can baptize us with the Spirit of new life.

Today I bring you good news. God has done it. The hard work of salvation has already been completed. A road has been prepared in the wilderness. In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. And Jesus has invited you to his home to eat this meal of grace.

Today, on his behalf I once again invite you to partake. You can go home again.
Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN](#)

