

Isaiah 35: 1-10  
Psalm 146  
Matthew 11: 2-10

Go and Tell What You Hear and See  
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I recently acquired an iPhone, which comes with GPS. By touching an icon on the phone's screen, I can bring up a map, with my location blinking away with a little blue dot. If I am in a car, the little blue dot moves along the road, showing me where I am. It's great, it's amazing! It means that I will never be lost, right? I will always be able to see, on a screen in the palm of my hand, exactly where I am and where I am going. Well, as long as the battery lasts, and as long as I have coverage. And, most important, as long as I have **context**. It turns out, and I found this out in Rhode Island on Thanksgiving, it is quite easy to lose one's way with a GPS. The blinking blue dot does not tell you where you are going. You need an address, a destination – and then you get a green line on the screen. Don't worry, eventually we did find the gas station, and then, the next day, we did find the coffee. And I found some humility, because I had always thought that I was good at finding my way – until I got an iPhone.

Finding our way: sometimes it is as simple as having the right map and recognizing landmarks. Sometimes it is a metaphor for a more complicated human experience. When we are talking about sadness, imprisonment, exile or confusion, finding one's way becomes overwhelming. We are then on a multi-level search, a journey that can be emotional and physical and spiritual.

The Hebrew Scriptures have many stories and images that speak to dislocation. Adam and Eve driven out of the garden of Eden, Jacob running away from his angry brother Esau, the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness, the Babylonian Exile, the trials of Job, the emigration of Ruth, the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. The yearning for one's true home, for security and peace and meaning: these are themes that run through our Bible. It seems that so much of what was written had its setting in a profound existential crisis: where am I, why am I, what happens now? And perhaps, most importantly, on whom or on what can I depend?

The 35<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Isaiah is a beautiful reassurance in the midst of those questions: deserts will bloom, people will be healed. But we rarely read the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah: it is not in our lectionary cycle of readings. I don't think you would like it all that much. It has horrible language about destruction and violence and smoke and sulfur and buzzards and jackals. I think that we are meant to wade through all that disaster, to taste the depths of despair, before the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter can be heard and truly speak to us. We need that context. Within that context, being offered a way out seems pretty remarkable, music to our ears. In the transformed desert, it says, "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; . . . it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." No traveler, not even the fool with the GPS in her hand, will go astray. I like that.

As I read that chapter again this year, I thought more about the "Holy Way." Some of us may be a bit suspicious of the word "holy," and a little reluctant to claim such a path for ourselves. But it resonates with something I heard about the first followers of Jesus in the first century. The

original name for those who were part of those fledgling gatherings was not “Christians.” They were not named after their leader and founder, though they called upon Jesus as their Lord. They were called “Followers of The Way.” (capital T, capital W) Before all the complicated arguments about the person of Christ and the nature of the Trinity, and who was in charge and why, there was The Way. You were more than an isolated dot on a screen: there was a context and a path, and people with whom to share it.

No wonder that the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah was so important to the early Christians and remains so important to us. We look around, as our ancestors in faith did, and we see companions on the Holy Way: people who have heard the words: “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.” People who have felt the need for a strengthening presence, so that their hands and knees can serve. Ransomed and redeemed people, people whose eyes and ears have been opened, people who have learned to dance and sing for joy, in spite of the odds. People who have seen terror and destruction and waste, and know that there is another way.

When John the Baptist engages in a long distance conversation with Jesus from his prison cell, as he does in our Gospel reading, he is in a moment of existential questioning. He had seemed so firm, so confident at the River Jordan, when he baptized Jesus months earlier. He told people to prepare the Way for the Lord, and that One was coming after him with a more powerful baptism of Spirit and fire. He told people to prepare for a great reversal. He was a very brave man. Now, in the prison of Herod Antipas, he waits and listens for the fruit of his ministry. Perhaps he begins to doubt: was Jesus really the One, the Messiah, who would transform humanity and creation? “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Jesus, in his usual pattern, seems to reply obliquely. He does not say ye or no. He does not speak of “who.” He speaks of “what you hear and see.” And his description of these things sounds remarkably like Isaiah’s Holy Way. Jesus was steeped in Isaiah’s prophecies, he read those scrolls religiously, so to speak. He takes them, with their promise of great reversals, as his marching orders. Rather than say, I am the One to enact the promises of God in the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, he sets about doing it. He embodies the promises, in fact, incarnates them. And then he invites the followers of the Way to do the same. He says to us with his life’s work: No desert is so dry that God cannot make it blossom with roses and crocus. No wilderness is so dangerous that God cannot bring it security. No eyes so blind that they cannot gain insight; no ear so deaf that it cannot hear the Word; no knee or hand too weak for God’s strength; no life so hopeless, no prison cell so narrow, that God cannot send in light and hope and joy. No person so lost that they cannot find a way to follow and companions on the road.

With this kind of message, Jesus had no need to dwell on his title or name or role. He just asked those people to look at and listen to the character of his ministry, and see for themselves whether it seemed like the Holy Way. He knew that it would offend some people, in fact that he was a stumbling block on some people’s path, but he blessed those who could follow.

In this season, mid-December in 2013, we would do well to see and hear what is around us, and discern the Way for today. We might ask, what is the Holy Way after the tragedy at Newtown. What is our Holy Way in the legacy of Nelson Mandela? What sort of reversals, what sort of healing can be possible today that can reflect the healing and transformative ministry of Jesus? Can we leave the prison cell of doubt and isolation and come together as followers of the Way?

As I heard tributes to Nelson Mandela in the last week, it became clear that he had an amazing ability to discern and act on a certain kind of reversal, and certain kinds of healing. He took his own suffering and imprisonment and turned it into an instrument of resistance and leadership. Upon his release, he no longer preached the way of violent revolution, but of reconciliation. In doing so, he offended, he was a stumbling block to, some of his former colleagues in the ANC. But he held to a path, he had discerned a way, that gave people a chance of a different kind of revolution. Was he the one who was to come, was he a messiah of sorts? He never claimed that for himself, saying that "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying." In other words, he just claimed a place in that motley company of people with weak hands that had been strengthened, feeble knees that had been made firm, and fearful hearts that had heard a word of hope. He claimed a community and a path: he found his context. He allowed his wilderness experience to bring out the best, rather than the worst, of his character.

In our Advent readings, our role in the kingdom of God is affirmed. We are agents and partners, with God, with Jesus, with each sinning saint, with Mandela, in healing the earth. We can claim this, as followers of the Way. And we claim, as members of this wounded and healing company, kinship with those who suffered a year ago in Newtown. We may not have discerned fully the way forward after that tragedy. But we acknowledge the unique healing role bequeathed to us by Isaiah and Jesus: the responsibility to care for those who linger in pain, the responsibility to prevent such pain when we can.

In this Advent, and every Advent, our partnership with divine grace is fueled by a holy unrest. We recognize the dissonance and dislocation in our society and in our personal lives, that which is at odds with the vision of Isaiah's blooming desert and highway. But that dissonance calls us forward in imagination, to imagine a future where that metaphor makes sense. That dissonance calls us out of complacency, so that we might find our context, so that we might find our path, so that we might join a healing pilgrimage whose destination is still a bit hazy to me. But what companions we have on the Way! Isaiah, John, Jesus, Mandela, you and you and you. May you be blessed with a vision of a God of infinite and unstoppable joy and hope. This Advent, may you see and hear the one who is coming, and may you go and tell what you hear and see. Amen.