

The 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

15 January 2017

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

Let's have a show of hands: How many of you have ever been driving somewhere (or riding with someone else driving) and you realize suddenly that you don't remember the last five, or ten, or fifteen miles of the trip? You haven't been asleep as such, but you're going along and thinking about any number of things and then you "wake up" and go "Wait, where am I? How did I get here? Where am I supposed to be going? That was my exit! Oh sh....oepolish!"

That happens to some of us fairly frequently. And it's usually not a big deal. We don't make a banzai move across multiple lanes of traffic (although there are exceptions); better, we go to the next exit, make a u-turn and try again. We commit an act of Metanoia. Turn around, change your thinking, think with the larger mind. Usually translated "repent".

Sometimes the road doesn't go back the way it came. That's when the project gets interesting. Sometimes you find yourself someplace you never expected to wind up, and you aren't altogether sure you want to be there anyway. One of my wisdom people used to say "Never waste a good crisis."

Never waste a good crisis.

I think what he meant by that is, what can I learn from this? What is the opportunity here?

On the other hand, if you weren't planning to go exploring, such a thing can be a bit discombobulating. Unnerving. Frightening, even.

Sometimes we have to stop, move to the side, step back.

Take a deep breath. And another. And another.

Remember that we can still breathe.

That the world has not come to an end.

That we are still here.

So then...what shall we do?

Isaiah is in a crisis this morning. He and the people of Judah and Jerusalem are in exile, far from home and land and all they have known. He is a prophet—which doesn't mean someone who predicts the future, but someone who tells the truth about what's going on in the present. "Here is where we are; this is how we got

here; the opportunity for Metanoia looks like this..." Isaiah the prophet has been listening to God, and speaking the word of God, for a long time.

I think Isaiah is a bit tired of prophet work at the beginning of the passage. "Listen here, people of the coastlands: Galveston, Corpus Christi, New Orleans; people of the plains: Tulsa, Denver, St. Louis! I've been doing this for a long time, since before I was born God picked me out for this. And what has it gotten me? Dragged off into captivity in a land I never wanted to come to, with a bunch of people who God told me early on would be hard-headed and stubborn and unwilling to listen. What are we doing here, how did we get here, what shall we do? Is this it? Is this all there is?"

And yet.

And yet.

The word comes...the promise that God is still with him, with them, even in this strange and far-off place. "It is too little, too small, too narrow a thing" says the Lord, "that I have called you to gather and lead the people of your own family and tribe and kin. I will send you as a light to the nations, a messenger to strangers and foreigners, outsiders, 'them people', because my good news, my salvation, shall be for everyone."

This passage, known as one of the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah, is a poem, intended to comfort and inspire those who hear it. As Christians we read it, or listen to it read, and think "Gosh, that sounds like Jesus!" And that is one way that the Church has understood the Servant Songs for many centuries, that Jesus is the one who does all these things. My friend Rabbi Robert in Georgia would tell us that in his tradition, "the Servant" is usually understood to be all the people of God, all called to be part of God's salvation for the good of the world.

As an Episcopalian, I want to invoke the *via media* on this: that is to say, I want both. Whatever we hear of Jesus, the Servant of God doing, we are called to do as well. Even (especially) in moments and places where we find ourselves bewildered and discombobulated. "How did we get here, what exit did we miss, what shall we do?"

Maybe you've felt discombobulated the last few days or weeks.

I know I have.

How did this happen? What shall we do?

The prophets are still among us. Isaiah and Jeremiah.
Moses and Miriam. Mary of Magdala and Martha of Bethany.
Martin and Rosa. Desmond and Nelson.
William Barber and Wendell Berry, and many many more.

Prophets are people who listen carefully to God, and then declare that word to others.

Not fortune-tellers, prognosticators of the future—because nobody knows that. But truth-tellers, keepers of wisdom and vision and hope in the midst of whatever's going on at the time.

John the Baptist is a prophet, who has listened carefully to God, and proclaims that word to others.

John the Baptist is also in a crisis this morning.

Because of what he has said, his followers are leaving him and going after Jesus. We heard about John the Baptist a lot in Advent. Each year two of the Sundays in Advent are focused on him. But this morning we're circling back to the story in the Fourth Gospel, our reading for today. John has twice pointed to Jesus and declared "Here is the Lamb of God." And those who have been his disciples, his students, his lead team, now go on down the road with Jesus.

John is, in fact, unmaking his own program and success, to tell the truth about what's in front of him.

Jesus sees these two guys following him and asks: What are you looking for?
"What are you looking for?"

It's the same question he will ask the soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane, just before his arrest. (18:4,7)

It's the same question he will ask Mary Magdalene, in the garden on the morning of the third day, as she stands, discombobulated and bewildered at the mouth of the empty tomb. (20:15)

This is the crossroads, the good and valuable crisis that ought not to be wasted. John the Baptist knows that he himself is not the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed, the Chosen One. He has said so earlier, and will say so again (1:19-23; 3:27-30) But the crisis, the crossroads, the place of discombobulation for John the Baptist, and the disciples, and the soldiers in the garden, and Mary Magdalene at the tomb, is that they are all looking for the usual sort of Messiah.

They are looking for a right-handed, power-wielding, bring back the good ol' days, "Make Judea Great Again" figure on a white horse with a sword to come galloping in, run the Romans out of town, reestablish "that old-time religion" and put God back into the public square. As if God had somehow been dismissed from the public square in the first place.

That's not who Jesus is. That's not what Jesus does.

Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed, the chosen servant and Lamb of God, not because he fulfills everyone's expectations about what a Messiah is and does, but because he completely upends the whole notion of Messiah-ship, redefines the terms, and offers a way into the salvation, mercy, reconciliation and peace of God that undoes all our assumptions and expectations about power, greatness, and strength.

The collect of the day prays that WE, the people of God, "may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory." But this glory appears, not in a tall stone palace in Jerusalem or a big white house in Washington D.C., but in a backwater village, in a barn, in an animal's feeding trough. This glory is seen not by monarchs and magistrates, but by agricultural workers working the late shift and egghead scientists with funny accents. This glory is crowned, not on a golden throne with courtiers in attendance, but on the town dump, with thorns and a crowd that looks on from a distance, or runs away and hides. This glory is discovered, not with trumpet blasts and a victory parade, but by a couple of women early in the morning in a graveyard. Or late that afternoon, in a locked room filled with scared and guilt-stricken friends.

It's not what you would expect. But it's exactly what Jesus tells them all along, in his words and in every action of his very life. Those who would be great will find that greatness in littleness. Littleness, lostness, lastness, even death itself do not have the last word. They are, in fact, only the beginning.

Those who cling to their life will lose it; those who lose their life will find it. Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it bears no fruit. The way up is the way down. The way down is the way up.