

Second Sunday in Advent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA

10 December 2017

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 and 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 with his commentary about the situation. He would say things, "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 listening to his non-stop commentary.

After being lost for about 2 hours, our hungry and terrified buddies just needed a rest. I remember seating down for a second to catch our breath. One of our peers had a great idea. "Let us sing!" He said. We all looked at him like he was nuts. "What if the bears hear us and know where we are?" One of us protested. But, he insisted. "Maybe those looking for us will hear us and know where we are." The only song we all knew was a Church Song that was quite popular at the time, "Con vosotros esta y no le conoceis, con vosotros esta, su nombre es el Senor" (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 in our song. We began to follow their voice and they followed ours, until we found our way out together.

Today, we have two different stories in Holy Scripture that speak of this exact same 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 home, their temple, their homes and 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 gospel of condemnation. They have been like my friend reminding us that our lostness

was our fault and that we were guilty. These prophets remind the people of their idolatry, their betrayal of God, their failure in following the commandments, their failure to care for the poor, the stranger, the orphan, and the alien. Their life is absolute darkness.

The other story is that of Mark's community in Rome around the year 70. They are in crisis as well. The Emperor Nero burned a third of the city in the year 64 and then blamed the Christians for it, which resulted in a horrendous persecution. At the same time, in the Holy Land, there is another insurrection, which the Romans have crushed in a savage way, killing thousands and destroying God's temple for ever. The house church wonders 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 gone by. 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. First, let us talk about the People of God in Babylon. Isaiah, chapter 40, written about 200 years after the first 40 chapters of the book, 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 God's people that he 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.

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 this young man quotes from Isaiah, Chapter 40, the same text we read today. This simple formula is powerful. First, it says that the Gospel of Jesus and about 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. He

loves his people so much that he has come. The one who prepares the way has already come to preach a baptism of repentance. The prophesy from Isaiah has been fulfilled. God has come down to his people and this is great news!

So, my friends, here we are 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, 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.

My friends if you are in the tunnel, 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 hasn't given up. He will never give up. You are too precious to him. He knows about your loneliness and your doubts. He knows about pain. He is not appalled by your sin. 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! The highways for God have been built and he himself is searching for you. Today, let me preach 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 you such a mighty Savior,

May the Savior of the world find you in your lostness today and may he bring liberation and joy into your life. Amen!