

Reach out to the hands that are stretching out to us.

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Advent B 2020 -Isa 40.1-11; Mk 1.1-8

A friend and I talked about some of the less obvious questions of Christian healing. We didn't talk about healing of body or mind, but about repentance and being welcomed back by God. Advent has a lot in it about repentance and forgiveness. They're the time-honoured way we're restored to fellowship with our God, with the source of our being. So they're our means of the deepest healing possible; they're about being made whole again when we've been broken. Let's think about this.

Today, we heard Isaiah proclaim a healing re-union with God to a broken, exiled people. They're lost. Between them and their home is a vast desert they can never hope to cross in their own strength. But Isaiah proclaims that a highway is being built to rescue them, beginning in Jerusalem, and crossing the desert without a bend. It's a construction of such vast scale that any mountain or valley in its path will be levelled to make way for it. The wilderness will no longer be a barrier to their home-coming; to being re-united with their God.

God will to cross the desert from distant Jerusalem, and gather them in gentle, strong arms. Their home-coming is assured. They need no longer despair over their exile; no longer is their life defined by where they can't be. The mountains and chasms of their despair are dissolved when they turn to watch in hope for their rescuer. They only need to turn and see that God will come to bring them home.

This is the Gospel, isn't it. People trapped by circumstances beyond their control, dominated by a powerful enemy, cut off

from God, and suddenly, good news – Gospel – breaks into their despair. God is doing what we cannot – God is coming to gather us up and bring us safely home. Home is the place where we can be whole people again; healed people. How utterly different from being in exile! As slaves in exile, all you have of yourself is the leftovers that your captor leaves after they've seized what they want from you. You're not a whole person; you're just a leftover. 'Be comforted,' cries Isaiah. Good news! Look for wholeness!

So how does this happen? Mark's Gospel begins by reminding us of what we heard in Isaiah ^(40.3) – a highway will roll across the wilderness, and God will travel it to come and rescue us.

Mark tells us these prophecies are fulfilled in John the Baptist; the promised messenger in the wilderness – and we're only four verses into the Gospel! He tells the story of John calling people out to the wilderness to discover the wilderness inside them; how they are a lost people in need of wholeness; lost and lonely, and needing to be found. John calls them out to him; calls them to remember their ancestors' exile, and like their ancestors, to repent – to turn and face God.

In baptism, John washes them in water to consecrate their bodies as fit dwellings for the Holy Spirit. And the one to come will wash them in that very Spirit; the Spirit of God – the very source of being. We will be whole in a way we couldn't have imagined; restored in a way we have always needed, but may never have known we could be. Whatever keeps us from that wholeness – even a mountain of despair, or a chasm of fear – it will be levelled by the one who's so determined to come to us that nothing will stand in the way. The coming one is Jesus, the Christ.

Like Isaiah's divine shepherd who crossed the desert to rescue God's people from exile, Jesus comes to accompany us through a wilderness. Each Advent we renew our commitment to this

journey – our commitment to be ready to meet this one who has come, and is coming again, this Jesus. We renew our commitment to go with him wherever he leads. Part of that commitment includes a willingness for life in the desert – for learning what it can teach us, and seeing its lessons as being of God. You can find the desert in prayer, in being alone, or even in simply stopping for a time; choosing stillness. It can also come uninvited.

These desert times help us find that trusting in God is possible because in the desert, we see ourselves for who we really are. We face our demons, and we learn where our trust really belongs.

We discover where our life has been heading. We own our part in responsibility for it. We're ready to turn from a life filled with the clutter of things we once treasured. We're ready to drop all that, and to reach out empty-handed to the hands that are stretching out to us. They stretch out across the mountains and canyons of the wilderness. We take those hands, and we know we're welcomed home; forgiven; healed; free; suddenly light; miraculously ... whole. It's a different sort of healing from what we normally think about. But this is Advent.

Amen