

## Note Even Fools Will Go Astray

## Isaiah 35:1-10

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, December 15, 2019*

Our text from Isaiah offers us numerous beautiful images of restoration, hope, peace and joy: the wilderness shall blossom (35:1), burning sand will become a pool and thirsty ground springs of water (35:7), the eyes of the blind will be opened (35:5), and the lame shall leap like deer (35:6). Travelers will no longer be threatened by dangerous animals (35:9).<sup>1</sup> Instead of sorrow and sighing, there will be joy and singing (35:10)! People will find their way home again without getting lost in a vast desert. In fact there will be a special highway for them a Holy Way! I especially love the line that not even fools will go astray (35:8) – that is good news for all of us, people! What beautiful and up-lifting imagery for all of us!

I will get back to these images but first a bit of context. The prophet is likely speaking to people who have suffered in exile at the hands of the Babylonians who took over the Southern kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and literally wounded many. They even intentionally blinded King Zedekiah (2 Kings 25:7).<sup>2</sup> When we hear in Isaiah 35:4 that God will come with vengeance and terrible recompense, Isaiah is drawing on the imagery of God as a divine warrior who comes to save God's people, at least the faithful ones.<sup>3</sup> Isaiah chapter 34 is actually brimming with violent images of God waging war on Israel's enemies. It describes the suffering of people, animals and creation as a result of this divine intervention in great poetic detail. Isaiah also has plenty of accusations against the Israelites because of their own faithlessness and focuses on faithful remnant as beacons of hope and restoration. Our text from chapter 35 describes the eventual restoration of the land, people and creation in general according to God's will. The reference to excluding the "unclean" may still imply that anyone not turning to worship the God of Israel will be excluded.

These stark contrasts of destruction and restoration, the lingering hints of exclusion, raise age old questions about God's judgment and the causes of our suffering. As you well know, I believe we need to read these texts through the lens of who we believe Jesus Christ and his message and call to all of us to be. Some Christians see Jesus Christ both as the child born to save/heal and the divine warrior who will come again to destroy and raise up some time in the future. I have difficulty seeing how the one who teaches us to love of our enemies and modeled it would come again to destroy. That is not to say that we don't experience suffering, sometimes due to our own actions or the actions of others who have strayed from the path of wholeness and belonging. I see such suffering as a symptom of our shared suffering of feeling disconnected from our true source, ourselves and each other in the present moment of the life we are living. If the life, death and resurrection of Christ is any indication of the cure, he models the need to

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<sup>1</sup> References to dangerous animals often actually referred to enemy nations

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Birch in **Feasting on the Word. Year A, Vol.1** (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2010) 53. Also note that at the time of Jesus' birth, Israel is again occupied, this time by the Romans and the Temple was destroyed in 72 CE. Isaiah's imagery was probably a comfort to people at that time.

<sup>3</sup> Commentary in Homileticonline from 12/16/2001

die daily to what separates and hurts us and rise each moment, each day to newness of life. There are moments when we do so kicking and screaming or only suffering opens us to deeper love. There are days when we can live this pattern with open-heartedness and humor. We love and support each other on this journey of daily coming home to God. Praise God that not even fools will go astray on the holy way set before us.

I would like to tell you a story about a man who travels on a pilgrimage of death and resurrection along with a motley crew of fellow travelers. They mirror for each other both the foolishness and beauty of their yearning. I would like to thank Lucy Goulet for reminding me of the story during our meditation on Tuesday! Perhaps you have seen the movie with Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez called "The Way." Here is the story:

Tom Avery is an accomplished eye doctor in his sixties with an established practice in California. He knows his patient's quirks and needs and serves them well despite his grumblings. Tom has some golfing buddies but something feels amiss overall. There is an underlying discontent and loneliness it seems – not something Tom is likely to talk about. His wife died a few years ago and his relationship with his only son, Daniel, has felt more strained ever since. Tom is now on a trip abroad and not communicating much about his plans. While Tom is playing a rather mediocre and uninspired round of golf with his friends, he gets a call on his cell phone. It's a police officer calling from France. "Mr. Avery, I am sorry to have to inform you that your son Daniel has been killed in an accident!" Tom is in shock and drives off with the golf cart that still has all his friends' equipment in it.

As it turns out, Daniel had just begun to walk the famous Camino, the pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James, Jesus' follower, in Santiago de Compostella, Spain. Daniel started in the French Pyrenees and tragically got caught in a storm in the mountains on his first day out. Tom immediately flies to France and on the way remembers the tension between him and Daniel when he drove Daniel to the airport for his world trip. Tom values steadiness, dependability, getting a good education and doing your job right. The fact that his forty something son Daniel had chosen to drop out of his PH.D. program to explore the world irked him to no end. He had wished that Daniel would settle and choose a decent career for his life. Somehow, neither father nor son felt that the other either understood or valued the other. During that ride to the airport, Tom had said to Daniel, "I am proud of the life I have chosen." Daniel looked at his father and replied: "Dad, we don't choose our life. We live our life" – a phrase that would come back to Tom over and over again in the coming weeks.

When Tom makes it to the small town in the mountains where Daniel died, the policeman meets him and becomes a compassionate guide to him. He explains the pilgrimage to Tom, having done it several times himself. He shows Tom the Pilgrim's passport Daniel had hoped to fill with the required stamps from various locations on the way to Santiago. That night, Tom goes through Daniel's hiker's backpack, including photos of himself and his late wife. Finally, some tears begin to come to the surface and a plan begins to form in Tom's heart and mind. He will finish the Camino for his son and scatter his ashes along the way. When Tom is ready to

leave, the policeman walks him to the edge of town and hands him a rock, saying that Tom will come to a place where he will need it. Then he asks Tom the classic question asked of all pilgrims: "Why are you walking the Camino?" When Tom says that he will do it for Daniel, the officer reminds him: "We all must walk our own journey. I, too, have lost a child, Tom. Go with God."

Tom begins his journey with a heavy heart. The box of Daniel's ashes is tucked in the side of the backpack. The very first day he comes to a place where someone has recently placed a cross and flowers. It dawns on Tom that this must be where Daniel died. He pauses and spreads some of Daniel's ashes there. For a moment he catches a glimpse of Daniel standing within sight. Tom walks on heartened and soon experiences the joys and challenges of pilgrim life. The pilgrim's hostel offers one big bunkroom with smelly and snoring pilgrims. One of them is Joshi from Amsterdam, a jovial extroverted full-bellied Dutch fellow from Amsterdam who also carries all sorts of smokeable and ingestible items from his hometown, if you know what I mean. Joshi is walking the trail because he feels he has to lose weight so that his wife will be happy with him again.

As much as Tom wishes for solitude, he both cannot rid himself of Joshi's company but also appreciates it to an extent. They don't always walk at the same pace. Tom often goes ahead and Joshi catches a glimpse of Tom quietly spreading what must be ashes near the trail. When he tries to find out what is going on, Tom at first asks him to mind his business but eventually tells him that his son has died on the Camino. As the days go by, Tom also meets Sarah, a Canadian woman who is verbally as prickly as a cactus. She says she is walking the trail to stop smoking when she gets to the end of it. She keeps calling Tom Boomer and rains down every stereotype and dismissal she can conjure up about the Boomer generation, though she herself belongs to it. Tom looks at her and says: "You sound angry!" and walks away. As happens on the Camino, their paths keep crossing and Tom, Joshi and Sarah walk together despite their differences.

They eventually come to a place along the route where pilgrims have created a small hill made of stones. It is a place where people unburden themselves symbolically, pledge their commitment to their journey, and pray for help. After they have each placed their stone, they hear someone screaming in a nearby field. A man is gesticulating wildly and throwing things, including his pilgrim staff. It turns out to be Jack from Ireland, a loquacious talker who is struggling from writer's block. He has a contract to add to the countless books about walking the Camino and cannot seem to get started on it. He is beside himself. If it weren't for friendly Joshi, the others would probably have preferred to leave him out in that field but all four walk on together. Tom is still quite aloof and often walks ahead, spreading Daniel's ashes. Jack keeps asking Joshi what is going on and Joshi reluctantly shares what he knows. Jack smells a story and quietly starts to pressure Tom to share more. Tom feels betrayed by Joshi.

After another long day on the Holy Way, they come to a village and drink too much. When Jack goes on and on about bourgeois life, Tom loses his calm. He tells Jack that he is a fraud who

acts Bohemian but depends on his bosses' credit card. He pretty much calls Joshi a sorry loser who will never lose weight since he is eating every Spanish delicacy he can get his hands on and lays into Sarah about her cynicism and anger. Tom gets up and stumbles and falls. Two policemen notice and come over. When he tries to fight them off, respectable Tom finds himself escorted to the police station in handcuffs.

It takes Jack's bourgeois credit card to bail him out. Tom mumbles an apology to his unlikely friends and they walk on together though Tom still struggles with all this closeness. Because of a late start, they have to sleep outside. The next morning, Tom tries to leave on his own. Sarah notices and tries to speak with him about the box he is carrying, not yet knowing what it contains. When she tries to pick it up, Tom grabs her arm. Sarah recoils and hits Tom with all the force she can muster. Tom just grabs his belongings, including the box, and walks off. As she catches up with him, she apologizes and explains that she had a trauma response from having been beaten regularly by her ex-husband, even when she was pregnant. She had opted not to have child in this abusive situation but still cannot forgive herself for it.

The four continue on the way together, slowly sharing more about their lives and aspirations. Tom gradually opens up to Jack and allows him to tell Daniel's story. Along their Holy Way, Tom keeps catching glimpses of Daniel whenever Tom's own heart opens to another person, to his own pain and to Daniel's own pain and dreams. When they are in a town near Santiago, a gypsy boy steals Tom's backpack including the ashes of Daniel's body. Again, Tom's unlikely friends stick with him through thick and thin, trying to deal with the situation. The father of the boy who stole the pack finds out what has happened, seeks out Tom and invites all of them to his home for a celebration. He also urges Tom to go beyond Santiago to a particular shrine along the Atlantic coast near Muxia.

We don't choose our life, we live our life.

When the four pilgrims make it to Santiago, they participate in the traditional famous pilgrim's mass in the cathedral, visit the tomb of St. James, get their certificate of completing the journey and each make their own prayers. Sarah leaves her cigarettes by a famous pillar in the cathedral. For Jack, it is the first time he has stepped into a church in decades. Though Sarah, Joshi and Jack had told Tom that they would not journey on, all decide to accompany Tom all the way to the water's edge which was once considered to be the end of the world. There they pause together. Sarah lights up another cigarette (not a healthy idea but so it goes) and laughs: "It never really was about the cigarettes." Joshi is just his loving jovial self and hopes that his wife will come back with him to Spain to enjoy each other. Jack has his writer's groove back but has also gone deeper in his care for other's joys and suffering. He is trying to come face to face with his own cynicism and reactivity to know what he really longs for. Tom has connected with his own son's dreams and pain and it has been a pathway into his own. As the film ends, we see Tom already on a new pilgrimage as he knows that his journey of healing is far from over. Now his face is relaxed and open, his eyes are shining with curiosity and delight.

The whole pilgrim journey has been a journey of deepening and getting in touch with their own pain, joy and deepest longing. The same is true for us. It has been a journey of letting go of anger, of self- and other blame and shame, of learning to forgiving ourselves for the ways we have not honored ourselves or our relationships. In as much as we are all fools, the story showed how four lovely human fools helped each other not to lose the way on God's Holy Way. It is always a way of coming home to love and forgiveness first. It is a way of not trying to live as though we were to control every aspect of our lives but to embrace the life we are living moment to moment. It is a way of living from a deeper trust that, with God, our deepest failings and sorrows can be held gently and even find transformation. Joys and sufferings will continue to be part of what is an on-going journey. We are asked to be present and willing to embrace what comes and allow the spirit to work through us. Then we can be agents of welcome and healing as we, as Ram Dass once said, walk each other home – over and over again. When we learn to walk this way, the deserts will indeed bloom and the thirsty ground become a pool.