

Second Advent – Year B - December 10, 2008 - Homily
Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8
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I have a particular fascination with doors: the metaphorical kind, more than the material kind! However, several years ago, I volunteered at Chandler Regional Hospital in the valley. I was assigned to the medical floor and my duties, among other things, involved filling water jugs, distributing and collecting meal trays, and running errands for the nurses. It meant that I went through the door of every room on the floor at least once during my time at the hospital each week. I never knew whom I would meet, and sometimes I was surprised when there was a repeat customer.

You may have heard me say this before - one of my favorite prayers to God is to open the doors that need to be opened, and to close the doors that need to be closed. That doesn't always mean I like it when God closes a door that I have peeked through and found to be particularly interesting! However, being transformed in Christ is captured rather nicely by John the Baptist when he says about Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Part of each journey in Christ – yours and mine -- is to remember that we are trying to lose ourselves for His sake. Advent is a very good time to be reminded of this highly relational exchange. Advent is also a portal, a doorway, to a fresh encounter with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The reading from Isaiah picks up on the themes of relationship and the ongoing presence of God in our lives. The relational aspect of God and His children has been present from the earliest writings in the Hebrew Scriptures. Just think about Adam and Eve meeting God in the Garden of Eden in the evening. But it is particularly overt in the covenant God made with Abraham. The promise that Abraham would be the father of all nations, and that Israel would be given stewardship of the Promised Land. In this passage from Isaiah, the Israelites are hearing a prophetic word of deliverance from suffering. The deliverance promised by God is most definitely not cheap grace. Israel has served her term. There was sin, and there was judgment. In the eyes of the Israelites, judgment was executed through exile and oppression by her enemies. Having repented of their sins, the Israelites are now experiencing a return from their exile. God didn't go anywhere. However, their repentance once again, has made them receptive to God's word. And the word is "comfort". The period of exile is over, they have welcomed God back into their lives, and the promise is heard, "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken".

Through the wilderness of sin and the lonely path of repentance, the door to God's forgiveness and grace is now open to the Israelites. The glory of God, that is God's presence is made manifest to them through God's faithfulness, steadfast love and provision. The prophetic voice reminds the people that they are mere creatures, utterly dependent on God – the one whose word will stand forever. This passage also speaks of restoration, not by human effort, but by God's gracious redemption and healing. There is a purpose for Israel to fulfill. The door that is open for them is to be a light to the nations – heralds of good tidings. The command not to fear, are the same words that God's messengers, the angels, speak when they bring a word from God. God's covenant promise is to maintain relationship, to be active in our lives, as we are active in worshipping and serving God. This kind of annunciation means that God is both able and willing to save Israel and you, and me, from comfortless suffering, and that fear has no role to play in our lives, when we trust in God.

The temptation that the Israelites faced all those years ago is the same as for you and me. It is fear, and falling into feelings of hopelessness and despair during times of misery and distress. We may not feel like we are in exile in the same way as the Israelites literally were. However, exile comes in many different shapes and sizes. It can be a wilderness of loneliness, illness, pain, or the loss of a job or other income. The grief and anguish are no less. It is the proverbial wilderness experience that we all must face, at least once. Being rational creatures, it is very hard for you and I to trust in God's

grace – that which we cannot see or perceive with our five senses -- when all the hard evidence is pushing us towards the opposite conclusion, and we are left wondering where God is in all of this.

The message of hope and comfort from Isaiah is the message that you and I can also hold on to during the hard times of life. God's power and control is firmly established, "See, the Lord God comes with might." There is only one creator, one ultimate power in the universe – the Lord our God. God is not powerless or careless about our pain or suffering, God is always there for us with comfort, compassion, and the assurance that He is in control. God's goodness and love is also affirmed for us by the prophet, in the images of the shepherd feeding, leading, and caring for his flock. This theme of the Good Shepherd is also one that we hear applied to Jesus, God incarnate. You and I are the Body of Christ, the hands, feet, arms and voices of Christ in the world today.

As a hospital volunteer, I was pleased and surprised to see one particular man turn up several times over a period of about a year behind the doors of the medical floor rooms. He had lost one leg to disease, and was battling a severe infection in his other leg. He wanted to thank me simply for being a friendly face, and for being willing to listen to him talk about his faith in God. I know you have all had similar experiences, where your presence has shown a friend or family member that God is truly present. We make a real difference when we support one another, our friends, and even strangers with a kind word or deed. Let God's invitation to lose ourselves in Him, continue to be a part of our own change in direction, our own Advent walk. May our discernment help each one of us to know which doors God has opened for us, and which He has closed in His unending desire for us to know the very best He has planned for our lives.

Amen.