

Advent 2—Year B  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13  
2 Peter 3:8-15a  
Mark 1:1-8

Today, we go back to the **beginning**—**Mark 1: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

And where does that **beginning** happen? (*pause*) *It doesn't happen at the center.* It doesn't happen in **Jerusalem**. It happens out in the **wilderness**. Whether that is the *new beginning* that **Isaiah** is contemplating for those who've been living in **exile** or the *beginning* that **Mark** is describing in the **gospel**—they both have to *begin* in the **wilderness**.

Sometimes, we are thrust out into the **wilderness**—that's the experience of **exile**; that's what's going on **Isaiah**. They had **lost their kingdom**; they had been **carried off to Babylon**; *they were far from home—exile*. Whatever had been familiar to them was gone. Whatever had been recognizable by them was gone. The structures they had relied on to navigate life as a people—gone.

And **exile** is a wrenching, disorienting experience. I think of all those these past years who have been sent into *exile by war*—all the *refugees* fleeing violence; all the *immigrants* who have been sent into *exile by economic realities* that make it impossible to provide for their families; *all those workers in exile who long for the good jobs* their fathers or mothers knew; all those *across the political spectrum who feel in exile from a government* who seems distant to their daily struggles. **Exile takes so many forms.**

And then there are the much more *personal forms* of **exile**. The **wilderness** visited upon us by *loss* and *illness* and *grief* and *limitations* and *futures that suddenly take an unexpected turn*.

**Exile is a stripping down sort of experience, and it is filled with longing—longing to go home.** And *the longing for home* is an ache in the heart. *Sometimes, home is a very tangible, very real place*—that's at least part of what has been expressed this week by those who have celebrated the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. If we don't understand this heartache for **home**, we'll miss a piece of what is going on in that enormously complex situation.

And *sometimes, home is a memory of who we were before we were thrust into exile*. Who was I before my *beloved died*? Who was I before my *relationship ended*? Who was I before my *company let me go*? Who was I before the *diagnosis came*? Who was I before *#MeToo gave voice to hidden and pervasive realities*? Who was I before I had to *flee the hurricane or the flood or the wildfire*? Who was I before *lockdown drills in schools or shootings at concerts or churches*?

**There's not a one of us in this room who isn't well acquainted with exile.** And even for those who seem to be sailing right along, cruising through life unscathed, *even for them*, something starts to give way revealing chinks in their well-fortified lives. Remember, **those at the center of power, those in the Jerusalem of Jesus' time, they made their way out to John in the wilderness**. The rich and powerful, they, too, had a *longing for home* because deep, deep down we know that **if any part of the body is in exile, we are too**. *My finding my way home* is inextricably bound up with *you finding your way home*, and sometimes, I have **to seek out the wilderness** to shed the trappings and let the static clear, so that I

can hear the voice of the One who truly will **herald the good news** that we're **all destined for glory together**.

**Exile** is hard, and the **wilderness** is scary, especially if the **home** we are trying to get back to is a *memory of what once was* because, in reality, *that place no longer exists*. The **wilderness** rearranges EVERYTHING. *There is no going back to what was—repentance—metanoia—it means “a change of mind of a purpose one has formed or something one has done.”* Whatever we are moving toward will be different than what was because *the whole landscape is different now*.

**Isaiah** names it poetically, but truthfully: **A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

There are places in our lives that *need to be brought up*, places where we have *inhabited the valley* for far too long; and there are places in our lives that *need to be brought down*, places where *our egos have separated us from our common humanity*; there are places where we experience ourselves as **uneven** and **rough** and *we so long to be level and balanced, so long for the roughness to smooth out and find some peace and calm*.

Wherever we are, there are places in our *heart and mind and body and spirit*, there are places in our *relationships and in the structures of our society* that need to be worked over in a big way. But this kind of deep-landscape-rearranging work that goes for the root causes of all that hinders us, this work is done at the hands of a **God who speaks tenderly, who speaks comfort, knowing that this exile has been hard on us**. The God who is moving this earth around in our souls, and in our lives, and in our world, is also in the business of **feeding sheep and gathering lambs**, and not by maintaining some distance, but by **gathering them in his arms, carrying them in her bosom, gently leading them all the way**.

*This process is uncomfortable, but we don't have to fear it—it is tender beyond words.*

And it's not just about us as individuals, or even us as discrete tribes of peoples, but this is about *all of humanity*. **II Peter** makes clear, **God is patient, like a thousand-years-is-like-a-day patient, like God's time is way different than our time, and God doesn't want to lose anybody**.

As **the glory of the LORD is revealed, we come into a new dawning**. God doesn't just long to redeem us, but **all flesh**. **God longs for all people to see this glory TOGETHER**. And that is the fatal flaw of what is going on *now* in **Jerusalem**. *That home so longed for by the people of Israel has changed*. **Jerusalem** is home not just to *one* faith, but to *three*. It's so hard to understand until you stand in the Old City and look out and see that the *Dome of the Rock* and the *Al Asqa Mosque*, sites holy to Islam, sit on top of the *Temple Mount*, holy to the Jewish faith, and the bells of the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*, which marks the site of the Jesus' crucifixion and the resurrection, those bells ring out behind you. It's **holy ground**, it's **home**, to Muslims and Jews and Christians, and *no one is ever leaving*. **God always promised that all nations would be drawn to the light of Jerusalem**. *No one tribe*, be it *Jewish or Muslim or Christian*, can lay claim to this place *to the exclusion of the rest—God's vision is always bigger*. **God longs to bring all flesh, from every tribe and language and people and nation, God longs to bring all flesh home; God longs for all people to see this glory together**.

This is about letting the vision of the **psalmist** take root in our lives in real and tangible ways, knowing that **home** is that place where **mercy and truth meet together and righteousness and peace kiss**. This is about knowing that **truth is still springing up from the earth and living in right relationship is still the longing that is streaming down from heaven and the paths of peace are still the paths that God walks**. This is **the new heavens and new earth** that **II Peter** dreams about; this place where **righteousness is at home**. As we come **home** to this place then we begin to understand that, though we may be **exiled** for all sorts of reasons, *home lives within us, always*.

**This is the good news of Jesus Christ—the Word has become flesh in our flesh, and that Word is always speaking tenderly in our ear**, if we will but get quiet enough to hear it. **You are home, already**, and once you know that, you want to **get to the highest mountain and herald that good tidings**, so that **all flesh can know that they are already aflame with the glory of God**. Once you know that **home lives within you**, then you are able to *risk everything* and you have the *capacity* and *power* to join *God in moving heaven and earth*, so that **the path becomes straight and clear and all people can see this glory together**.

Know that your **exile** is such **holy ground**—it is the place where **your longing for home** gets named with *exquisite clarity*, and sometimes that naming *breaks your heart*. And the **wilderness**, it is **necessary**, because this is where *your longing gets refined* and *the work is done* to **clear the path to find that for which you so long**.

In these times of **exile**, trust, with every fiber of your being, that, as your soul *and* our world get reworked, the hands that are shaping it, and us, anew are **skilled** and **tender**.

Sisters and brothers, hear it again and again and again, **“Comfort, o comfort my people,’ says your God.”** Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC  
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