

Advent 3—Year A
Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

I wrote this sermon Thursday morning *before* I heard the news about Jeremy’s death. It feels even more poignant, and more urgent, now. And I had to ask myself Thursday night, “*Do I still believe what I’m about to preach?*” I do, maybe even more. So, here it goes.

I am so aware that this is a tough time of year for so many people. A lot of us struggle with the darkness that grows longer.

- Many of us are keenly aware of **those no longer with us**—it may be the first holiday season without a partner or child or parent or sibling; or maybe it’s been years since their death, and we still feel their absence so keenly.
- **Physical illness** may be taking a toll on us or someone we love.
- Faculty and staff at ASU tell me frequently how many **young adults are really struggling with mental health issues** right now. These last few years have not been kind to this cohort.
- It could be that our families are living in the tumult of **active addiction** or **domestic violence** or **untreated mental illness** or **intractable conflict**.
- This is also a time of year when many of us gather with extended family, which can bring a whole host of issues. Many families are dealing with a **relationship that has ended** and the heartache that comes with that loss, or are bridging **hard political divides**, or there are **disagreements** about how to best care for an **aging family member**, or there are the **hurts** that have long simmered, or there is simply the dynamic that we all **revert to our kid selves** when in the presence of our siblings or parents.
- This time of year can bring an uptick in **substance use** under the guise of holiday parties, or just as means to get through the season.
- For some, **coping with substances** goes tragically wrong—I’ve heard of two **overdoses** in our wider community in the past week. Fentanyl is robbing so many people of life and so many families of loved ones. We lost our daughter-in-law to an overdose just a few years ago.
- **Mental health issues**, which are already difficult, can escalate amidst the stresses of this season, and, with the ever-present glorious images of others on social media, you can **feel like your life is nothing** by comparison.

One of you sent me a podcast before Thanksgiving that I listened to driving to Kentucky. It was on *Hidden Brain* and was a conversation with Vivek Murthy, current Surgeon General of the United States. It was Dr. Murthy who issued *The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health* just a year ago. But this podcast was called *Relationships 2.0: An Antidote to Loneliness*ⁱ. It is Dr. Murthy’s contention that we are suffering from “**an epidemic of loneliness** that has a profound impact on our mental and physical health.”

I've been thinking about loneliness ever since, and how it manifests in so many of our lives, often hidden from plain view, often known only to us, which only increases our loneliness. I think many of us are holding a lot as we move through this Advent season and toward Christmas.

I am going to ask a really vulnerable question now, and if you just can't do this, at least do it in your mind's eye. *If any of what I have said thus far connects with you or someone you love, would you raise your hand? (pause)*

Look around. You are not alone.

So, let us hear these words from **Isaiah** this morning addressed *to us* in our **specific** situations with great **particularity**:

Strengthen the weak hands,

and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

“Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come and save you, make you whole and heal the ache within.”

If you feel **blinded**, unable to see a way forward, hear of this God who will **open your eyes**. If your **ears are so stopped up** with negativity, or cynicism, or hopelessness, hear of this God who can **unstop them** so they can again hear a word of encouragement. If you feel utterly **paralyzed**, hear of this God who **makes the lame leap like a deer**. If you feel like you have **lost your voice**, lost your capacity to speak at all because your reality is unspeakable, hear of this God who knows that you, yes you, amidst your darkness, still have **a song of joy to sing**.

If you are in the **wilderness**, in the **desert, parched**, and **thirsty**, hear of the **waters that can break forth** even there; hear of the possibility that something can **blossom in this desert** you are wandering; look for the **crocus** who declares with her **blossoms that joy is still to be found**.

If you feel **trapped**, and you just **can't see a way forward**, hear **Isaiah's** good news: **“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.”** Your feet are on the Holy Way, and it's simply **impossible for you to lose your way**, disoriented and lost though you may feel.

If the **darkness has kidnapped your spirit, imprisoned your soul**, hear this proclamation from **Isaiah**:

The ransomed of the LORD shall return,

and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

God has ransomed you, has won your release. You shall come again joy and gladness, and your sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Yes, *it is dark*, but as **John's prologue** will remind us in just two weeks: **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.**

The **God** in whom we place our hope is **intimately acquainted with the darkness** and **knows how to shine light**, *even there*, not enough to blind us, but **just enough to hold us and show us where to place our next step**. The **God** in whom we place our hope is **coming in the dark of night to slip into our flesh** *so that we will know, forever*, that **WE ARE NEVER ALONE**.

And because the **Word is made flesh in our flesh**, **WE** carry the capacity, and responsibility, to be that **Word of hope and presence and connection to one another**.

In that podcast, Dr. Murthy went on to talk about how **“human connection and strengthening our social ties” is the antidote to this epidemic of loneliness**. Ever since I listened to that podcast, I have thought, **“This is the call of the church.”**

One human connection is the antidote to this epidemic of loneliness that is swallowing us. God entered our flesh sealing connection with us. In these next weeks:

- How might we **extend that connection to someone else who yearns for it?**
- How might we **look into one another's eyes close enough and long enough to see their longing to know they matter and meet that longing with the deep “yes” of our presence?**
- How might we **practice this with one another in our St. Luke's community, and then, be the bearers of this good news out in the world?**
- How could you **extend this practice to those whom you don't know, to those whom you meet on the street or in a store?**
- **What can you do to make a connection?**
- **What can we do to strengthen our social ties with the rest of humanity who yearns to belong?**

And *on the flip side*, what is **in your way of allowing a connection to pierce your armor?** We so often speak of **sin** as anything that **blocks the flow of love**, but what if **sin** is also **blocking the flow of connection**, both the connection we might extend to another *and* the connection they might be trying to extend to us? If this is so, then the prayer of the **Collect** becomes the *plea of our hearts*: **“Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and because we are sorely hindered by our sins, please God, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us from this epidemic of disconnection and loneliness.”**

One human connection can change a life. It may be our **kind eyes**, our **patience**, our **willingness to slow down enough to be present** that weaves someone back into the fabric of this human family to which we all belong, but sometimes despair we don't.

One human connection can save a life, literally; we see this again and again.

And, this week reminds us, so painfully, that *sometimes, it doesn't*. But even if that person should depart this world, *our connection still mattered* because the energy of our love *accompanied* them through their dark night and into eternity—*love is always stronger than*

death. Love is not bound by the darkness or confined to this world—Jesus shows us that through his life, through his death, through his descent into hell, through his life that the tomb of death can't hold—LOVE SPANS THE REALMS, always and forever.

Today, **Isaiah** brings good news for us, in the **very particular, specifics of our own situation**, but **good news is always meant to be shared**. May we not rest until **EVERYONE knows companionship on the Holy Way and knows, without a doubt, no matter what is going on in your life, and even in your death:**

**“YOU ARE LOVED,
YOU MATTER,
AND YOU NOT ALONE.”**

Amen.

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ⁱ [Relationships 2.0: An Antidote to Loneliness--Hidden Brain--replayed 11/14/22](#)