

A Way in the Desert
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
December 7, 2014 (Advent 2)
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

The year before Columbus set sail for the Americas, a small child was born in a town in Spain. His name was Íñigo Lopez. His family was a semi-noble family. He was the 13th child in the family, and embarked on a career of a military officer. He was a brilliant and brave fighter and had plans to make quite a name for himself as a soldier.

When he was 30 years old, he was fighting in a battle against the French with a Spanish Army at a place called Pamplona and his leg was shattered by a cannon ball and the other was wounded. He was captured by the French but because he had been such a noble opponent, they turned him back over to the Spanish Army for him to recuperate and he was taken back to his home. He planned to spend his recuperation reading trashy novels, frankly. He was looking for romances to kind of keep himself entertained. And in his home there just wasn't that much literature, so he could only find two books: an account of the life of Christ and then a very famous book called the *Golden Legend*, which is a book of a lot of the early lives of the saints, and he was so desperate for reading material that he started reading these books, and he found his heart changing in some ways that he didn't expect.

He found himself very attracted by the lives of the saints and their courage and their discipline and all of those things that he really valued as a soldier. And as he recuperated -- he never fully recuperated, but went through his whole life with a limp -- he devoted himself to the life of the church and became one of our great teachers and mystics.

We're spending this Advent reflecting on the lectionary texts that are part of our tradition for this time of year, but as our through motif, looking at the lives of some of our great mystics. And the reason for that is Advent is the time when we remember again this amazing mystery of the incarnation, that our God is not a God who waits for us to become holy, who'll wait for us to get to Him, but who chooses to come to us where we are in this miraculous birth in Bethlehem.

Íñigo Lopez later took the name Ignatius and then added to that his hometown which is a place called Loyola, and Ignatius Loyola became one of the great reformers in the Roman Catholic Church and one of the great teachers and mystics of our tradition. He is not necessarily known as a mystic. When you look at the pictures of him, he still has got this sort of military bearing about him, but he was a passionate lover of God. His followers used to actually make fun of the fact, and I love this, that he couldn't get through a worship service without crying several times, that he had this great, great love and appreciation for who God was and nurturing that love and the people around

him, and had several very powerful mystic experiences that shaped his understanding of who God was.

The scripture lessons that the lectionary lays out for today are very familiar passages. And we talked last week about this arc of Advent that starts with us looking forward to the time when Christ will come again and then moves to the place where we look backwards as we remember Christ's initial incarnation. And as the second week in Advent, we're still looking forward a bit, and these scripture lessons are pointing towards that ultimate day when God's kingdom will come in its fullness.

II. The Preparation

The passage from Isaiah is right at the beginning of that place in Isaiah that we call Second Isaiah. This is a later prophet who is speaking to the community that was in exile in Babylon. So, this is a community that has seen Jerusalem burned and the temple destroyed, and are people without hope, feeling deeply the punishment of God. And in this particular passage, that a number of Biblical scholars refer to as the Call of Second Isaiah, God speaks to him and says, "Comfort my people. Comfort those who are in exile and know no comfort. Speak to them my word of hope that as hopeless as your situation seems right now, a new day is coming." We've heard these words so often that sometimes we miss the fact that there's a dialogue that's happening here between God and the prophet. And God says to Isaiah, "Cry out." In other words, "Tell the people that I'm coming." And Isaiah -- I love this -- responds, "What do you want me to call? The people are -- their lives are like grass. They wither today and are gone." He says to God, "I'm living in a society that is without hope. We're ruled by a Congress that can't get a single law passed. We continue to be plagued by racial injustice across our country. We seem locked in intractable wars across the world. It all is so fleeting and so futile. What am I supposed to say to these people?"

And God responds, "The grass does wither and the flower does fade when the breath of the Lord blows upon it, but the word of God stands forever." In other words, you're not preaching because you all are going to get it better sometime. You're not preaching because history is going to change the way history has always worked. You're preaching a word of hope because in spite of all of the hopelessness, the word of God remains secure and God's promise never, ever changes. So, that the people who are in exile in Babylon are going to march to Jerusalem across a highway in the desert. You're not going to do that. God's going to do it. God's going to do it. All you've got to do is get that highway ready. Prepare a highway in the desert. Make the path straight for the people to march on when God's freeing action happens.

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, of course picks up on that theme and starts to call people to prepare themselves for Christ's coming, and he uses the same imagery of preparing the way in the desert. "And the way that you prepare that way," John the Baptist told the people, "was to repent, was to figure out those places in your life that things are not going as God would have them and start to turn those around." That's

what repent means, it means to turn around. John invites the people to repent of those places in each of our lives where we have fallen short of God's high calling to us. John invites us as a community to look at those places in our communal life where we have fallen short, where we have perpetuated systems of economic injustice and racial inequality.

Sin in our tradition is a small "s." It's those things that we do that cause brokenness and harm, those places where we fail to express love to one another, and it's a capital "S," it's the systems in which we live. It's the system of brokenness that keeps people trapped in a system of oppression and poverty and racism and sexism and all of the -isms that we wrestle with. So, John wants us to understand that if we're going to get ready for God's action, we've got to do some clearing out work, we've got to do some brush clearing to get ready for God's spirit to move, to be ready for that action to happen. And repentance is the way we clear out that brush and prepare ourselves to experience the power of God in our lives, both as individuals and as a community.

III. The Examen

This was also a very, very important theme in the life of Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius, after he started to have this conversion experience during his healing process, retired to a cave outside of a small town called Manresa, which is in the Catalonia area of Spain. He lived in a cave outside of Manresa for about 10 months and engaged in a very serious discipline of prayer and meditation. He had a very powerful, mystical experience of God in which things started to get very clear for him about how we needed to live with one another. And he started developing his primary discipline that he's known for which is at the heart of Jesuit spirituality, in a book that he wrote called *The Spiritual Exercises*, how we go about identifying where God is moving in our life and following that. And the beginning of these spiritual exercises is the discipline that he calls the Examen. And I want to share it with you in a little bit of detail because I think this is a really helpful structure for us as we reflect on what does repentance look like in our lives. And there are five stages to this, and if you're like me, you're going to remember one, three, and four.

And so, there's a little note place on your bulletin. Let me encourage you to take that out and just jot these down, because they're fairly simple but they're very helpful. And it's a very helpful structure that Ignatius encouraged his followers to engage in every evening before they went to bed. It doesn't take long and I want to suggest it's a really helpful Advent discipline to start as we prepare the way for the spirit to move.

Ignatius told his followers that you start this process by -- and we talked about this a couple of weeks ago on Thanksgiving -- by remembering and thanking God for the things that God did for us today. It starts off with gratitude. It always starts with gratitude -- where did God move and what did God do for you today that you have to be thankful for?

The second part of the process is Ignatius encouraged his followers to review the day, play the day over in your mind and in your remembrance, look for the places that you in retrospect see God moving. Where did you see God at work in your day? Where was there maybe an invitation that you accepted that led to some spiritual growth? Where was there an invitation that maybe you didn't accept and it was a missed opportunity? But review the events of your day in your mind and look for those places that you feel like God was moving.

So, gratitude is number one. Review is number two. Repent is number three. And as you do this review, where are the places that you didn't accept an invitation to grow spiritually? Where are the places that you were hurtful when you didn't need to be hurtful? Where are the places that you were less honest than you needed to be? Where are the places that you contributed to the problem? Identify those places and make a decision to turn around. They don't have to be big. And Ignatius was not encouraging us to beat up on ourselves. This is not a self-flagellation thing, although frankly he did more of that than he needed to do. Literally.

Okay. You got me sidetracked! It's not about self-flagellation. It's about appraising what didn't work the way we would've wanted it to work. And if we're honest, each of us has those places in our day. Some of them are sins of commission, things that we did that we shouldn't have done; some of them are sins of omission, things that we should've done that we didn't do. But all of us have those places. So, what are they?

The fourth step is to ask God for forgiveness, to invite in and to claim that thing that is at the heart of our faith that Christ's sacrifice on the cross has washed all of those places away. We don't have to dwell on them. We don't need to wallow in guilt. We need to let them go. Ask forgiveness of God. Often ask forgiveness of the people that are involved if we have harmed somebody else. But to ask forgiveness and then let that go.

And then, last, to ask God for grace for the day to come. To ask forgiveness for what's happened and ask for strength and power to move forward with grace and faithfulness.

This does not have to be a long process. You can do this in a couple of minutes lying on your bed before you fall asleep. But what Ignatius realized, and it's a very helpful realization, is sometimes, often generally, it is easier to see where God is moving in retrospect than in the moment itself. Amen? And what he wanted to do was put in place a structure that gives us a chance to reflect and start to observe those places with a little bit more clarity.

IV. Conclusion

Mystics are about not understanding who God is but experiencing who God is. It's a process of getting out of our head, getting into our heart, observing where the spirit

moves, learning from that, celebrating that, and receiving the power that the spirit offers.

Our current pope, Pope Francis, is of course a Jesuit himself, and deeply, deeply steeped in this tradition of Ignatian spirituality. He had an interview recently where he is talking about Ignatius and what a powerful reformer he was, but he also talks about him as a mystic. He says, "Ignatius was a reformer and a mystic but especially," he said, "a mystic." And Francis said, these are his words, he says, "I love mystics. Because religion without mystics is just philosophy. It's not about understanding. It's about knowing in our heart who God is."

Advent is the time when we can start that process, when we start to clear out the rubbish, to make the path straight and clear out the space for God to move, clear out the space for God to move in the future as we look forward to Christ's final coming and to clear out the space right now as we prepare again to experience the miracle and the mystery of the incarnation at Christmas.

Amen.