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Advent 3A
Peace, Seattle
December 15, 2013
Isaiah 35:1-10

THE WAY HOME

Each year on the East African plains one of nature's most spectacular phenomena takes place as upwards of two million wildebeests, zebras, antelope, and giraffes journey hundreds of miles on vast plains to where seasonal rains have transformed arid wasteland into an oasis.

Arriving at their destination just as the grass is rebounding from drought, they eat their fill and give birth to their young, and all that teetered at the edge of loss is restored again.

This annual migration, and the symbiotic relationships between the diverse players in this vast drama, testifies to how finely attuned Earth's flora, fauna and geography have become over the ages.

This morning, a transformative journey like this one becomes Isaiah's inspiration as he announces God's dream for a weary, exiled people.

The first week of this Advent series, Isaiah announced God's all-encompassing dream of SHALOM for the world, a dream whose gravity pulls people and nations to its center of peace.

Last week we learned that when all that remains of hopes and dreams is a STUMP and the future itself seems called into question, God coaxes us to keep on trusting, keep on looking for the new shoot, the root of a new beginning, to arise.

And this week Isaiah takes us on a journey in which the path toward home has been transformed into a holy way, and a rag-tag assortment of wounded humanity—deaf, dumb, blind, and lame—find wholeness as they travel on that sacred way.

God, the poet promises, **will visit his people again, bringing healing in his wings, and will lead them on a journey home.**

Where is home—what is home?

A while ago a young man came to see me; (I'll call him Joe.) He was looking for help in a helpless situation. We'd visited a number of times in recent years, and he'd always wore a kind of half-smile on his face that seemed to say, "No matter what is going down, I'll survive, I'll make it."

But this time was different. This time tears came. My friend told me how he was been separated from his biological parents as a young child; how he went through a series of foster homes where he was treated badly.

Those places had the word "home" attached to them, but they were never truly home. So he'd done his best to put them behind him.

He'd made some bad choices along the way, and spent some time in juvey. But when, unexpectedly, he became a father about 4 years ago, he discovered welling up inside himself a deep determination to succeed where his biological parents and foster parents had failed. He wanted to BE HOME for his daughter. The problem is, he wasn't sure he knew the way.
Joe has a hugely generous heart. In spite of everything, his impulse is to trust people, and because of this he's been taken advantage of time and time again.

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New crises were piling up, and the latest one—which had left him and his family homeless again—was threatening to push him over the edge. Joe was looking for the path that would take him from exile to home.

In our gospel today, we find John, who's given everything to God's mission, behind bars and suffering his own kind of exile; struggling with doubt.

John, who was used to being in wide open places preaching his heart out, suddenly found himself hemmed in by the four walls of a prison cell.

Matthew tells us,

> WHEN JOHN HEARD IN PRISON WHAT JESUS WAS DOING, JOHN SENT DISCIPLES TO ASK HIM TO ASK: ARE YOU THE ONE? OR ARE WE SUPPOSED TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER?

John knows that his chances of getting out alive are nil.
He needs to know if his call, his preaching, his life will be vindicated. **Is Jesus the One—Or not?**

John was clear about what God had sent him to do:
- his job was to set the axe at the root of the tree,
- and Messiah's job was to pick up where John left off and finish the job.

As far as John could tell, that wasn't happening.

Stuck in prison, John begins to wonder whether the one he baptized at the Jordan was truly God's Messiah. The only answer John will accept is one which comes straight from Jesus' mouth, so he sends disciples to ask point blank: **ARE YOU THE ONE, JESUS?**

How does Jesus answer?

GO TELL JOHN WHAT YOU HEAR AND SEE:
- THE BLIND SEE,
- THE LAME WALK,
- LEPERS ARE CLEANSED,
- THE DEAF HEAR,
- THE DEAD ARE RAISED,
- And THE POOR LEARN THAT GOD IS ON THEIR SIDE.

God has not abandoned you, neither has God abandoned the world.
God's dream is unfolding. God is coming to take you home.

In this season of the year, famous for its high level of unfulfilled expectations, God meets us, as he met John, as he meets JOE, with the promise that in Jesus our deepest longings for transformation, our deepest yearning for wholeness and community will be satisfied.

We are on a journey together. And every step we take, every act of mercy, every offer of friendship, every gesture of compassion—plants our feet more firmly on that Holy Way.

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Our culture gives us the message that we're on this journey alone. But Isaiah tells us, and Jesus shows us, that we are not doomed to a solitary struggle; but rather that God's dream for our world is to link us together in companionship and community. God gives us the gift of one another.

The God we meet in Jesus is not only the one who heals, forgives, and saves, but the one who MAKES HIS HOME WITHIN US AND BETWEEN US, AND CALLS US HOME.

What is home? Where is home? HOME is wherever Jesus is. And that is where hope resides.

This hope may seldom take the exact shape we want it to. And it may not take the shape we expect. But it will take the shape we need, when we place ourselves in God's trusting hands, and journey together.

Amen.