

*Based on Isaiah 35.*

If you pay attention to the latest CNN poll of American adults, things are going badly in our country, at least according to sixty five percent of us. By and large this grim outlook is financial, as the cost of living has skyrocketed and most of us have cut back major expenses in response.

At the same time, the poll indicates relatively few of us are seriously worried about someone in our household losing their job. Neither are most of us seriously worried anymore about losing someone we love to COVID. While the pandemic is, according to the World Health Organization, still emphatically with us in a global sense, we have certainly moved on from the imminent crisis that paralyzed us so profoundly not that long ago. So, while we may have a general perception of negativity, at least when it comes to the basic security of our lives and our jobs, most of us are doing okay.

Contrast this moment of mumbling and grumbling with the circumstances of the ancient Israelites on the receiving end of Isaiah's vision in our Lesson today. Far from home in Babylon, forced to labor in building up wealth for their mortal enemy, who murdered their leaders, destroyed their houses - and their church - and dragged them into exile as the spoils of war.

Think Brittany Griner freezing in a brutal Russian prison, or Paul Whelan, who is still wrongfully detained, four years into his prison sentence, or any of the other sixty American nationals who continue to languish in foreign prisons. Think truly despairing, truly losing hope, truly anguish from that gnawing ache of feeling forgotten, not just by those who remain at home - without even realizing how lucky they are to be there - but by God.

This is the true context into which Isaiah's vision speaks. Which does not disregard the very real grim outlook most of us who remain at home rightly feel. We are, after all, still cutting back, many of us severely, some of us working two or three jobs just to make ends meet. We are still practicing active shooter drills in our schools and still emitting fossil fuels and still worried that the war in Ukraine will turn nuclear. We are still suffering from and struggling with all the harm that human beings do to one another and it still hurts.

Which is why we have focused so deeply on the vision of Isaiah this Advent and the desperate need for we who are human to be transformed by compassion. Indeed, if we recall from the past two Sundays, the earlier visions of Isaiah insist that we submit to this transformation. *We* must beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks, thereby transforming *our* warlike nature into the pursuit of peace. *We* must follow the lead of a little child whose playmates include a wolf and a lamb and a goat and a lion and a snake, thereby transforming *our* predatory instinct into the Beloved Community.

But let's face it. That kind of transformation is really hard, maybe even impossible, even if every single one of us firmly believes we want it and even actively commits to it. Just witness the Guns to Gardens event yesterday, which included blowing a fuse and stripping a saw blade and literally pounding what was left of the barrel of a rifle on the pavement to get it to break. If this is what happens to those of us who actively seek transformation, you can see why so many of us just say, thanks but no thanks, we'll just stay how we are.

Even if every single human being on the planet firmly believed that kind of transformation was necessary, even if every single human being on the planet actively committed to that kind of transformation, how painful would it be? How long would it take? And the truth is we don't, every single one of us believe it or submit to it, so where does that leave us? And where does that leave God?

Which, believe it or not, is also the situation for the ancient Israelites in our Lesson today. They have heard the warnings of the prophets to get their act together, *or else*. They know Isaiah's vision requires them to be transformed by compassion, but they don't do it. And now they suffer the consequences.

Those of you who attend our Tuesday night Teach the Preacher gatherings know the verses I chose not to read aloud from Isaiah 35 speak very clearly about the judgment of God. Of course I didn't read them out loud because we here at SPC really don't like to talk about the judgment of God. But let me be clear, when we read of God's judgment in the Bible, it is usually referring to this very point: God knows that we who are human have the capacity to live as Beloved Community, with enough to eat for everyone, and a home to live in for everyone, and a thriving vocation for everyone, if every single one of us firmly committed to it. But we don't. So we end up in Babylon. Or a Russian prison. Or mumbling and grumbling about the cost of living, even when we have a home.

And God could just leave us there. And the truth is, if God was rational, knowing full well the ramifications of the human condition as it is on the integrity of creation, God would have very good reason to leave us to spiral in our crazy. And sometimes it feels as if God has just left us there.

Which is why this message from Isaiah may be the most miraculous vision of them all. God is not rational! Alleluia! The very heart of God *is itself* transformed by compassion! The irrational compassionate heart of God leads the hands that have been weak to suddenly grow strong. The irrational compassionate heart of God leads the knees that have been feeble to suddenly grow firm. The irrational compassionate heart of God unleashes the water of grace to flow undammed through the wilderness. The irrational compassionate heart of God forms an oasis of grace that replenishes us, and revives us, and restores us to new life. And even leads us to sing in joy.

The good news, my friends, is that this Compassion Transformation that is our Advent journey is not entirely up to us, in our mumbling and grumbling and even with our heartfelt desire to make it so. The good news is that the compassionate heart of God is making a way for us through the wilderness, and we get to celebrate along the way.

Out of nowhere, it seems, in our Lesson today, the word of hope comes, not from the most recent CNN poll, not from the United States Air Force swooping in to save the day, not from the White House negotiating a prisoner swap, but from the prophet in exile in the prison cell next to us, whispering:

Hey [fill in your name]! Did you hear? The icicles clinging to our dreadlocks are about to melt into a hot springs spa! The cannabis that they caught us with as an excuse to put us in this place is about to transform into Earl

Gray tea leaves for us to sip on as we soak! And the jailer who has been tormenting us so terribly in this prison is getting trained as a massage therapist!

Hey [*fill in your name*]! Did you hear? We're going HOME!