

**December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent - Peace**

*Readings: Is 40:1-11; Ps 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Pet 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8*

We are taught at a young age to try to put ourselves in the ‘shoes’ of others. This week I thought a little about what Darren Wilson might be going through as the police officer that shot the unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This week Wilson tendered his resignation from the Ferguson police department, citing that his presence would be a detriment to the community. While he has publicly stated that he feels his actions were justified (and the grand jury agreed with him), being at the centre of a national storm must be taking its toll. I wonder how often he thinks about how he might have handled the situation differently? I wonder if he'd look around town at the destructive wake of the riots and feel guilt over the part he played in this tragic situation?

I wonder about what Bill Cosby, recently resigning from the board at his beloved Temple University, must be feeling. I wonder about the agony he experiences as he watches the legacy he built come crashing down before the eyes of a watchful world. I wonder about Jian Ghomeshi and what it must feel like to have one's personal life scrutinized by a nation. I don't know whether these individuals feel guilt over the things they've done – but I do know that behind facades of self-justification lie voices that would accuse and condemn the self. These voices remind us over and over again of the worst things we've ever done in our lives and strip us from the hope of ever breaking out of the cycle of sin and despair. Over time we come to believe these voices, and we certainly resent them, until our anguish boils over and we cry out for it to be over.

“Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” This is the way Isaiah described the longing for God to end the suffering of God's people. It is the desperate plea for things to change... for an end to the agony. Like the distinctive smell before an outpouring of rain, today's reading contains an odor of change for God's people. It is a piece of hopeful poetry strategically placed in the book of Isaiah to mark the end of the long exile decreed by the prophet a chapter earlier. Reading

between the lines, or between the chapters in this case, is essential in understanding this text's significance. Scholarship agrees that some 200 years passed between the exile decreed in 39:6-7 and the promise of chapter 40. During these two centuries all of Israel's royalty was carried to Babylon, symbolic of the utter defeat of the nation and helplessness of its people.

In one place in Scripture it is said that the people of God 'hung up their harps' while in Babylon. They put away their instruments of praise and expressions of joy. Those things they used to delight in were now reminders of the way things used to be – souvenirs of their loss and symbols of shame. For the people of God did feel ashamed. Time and again the stories describe the people's calamity as being the result of their corporate sinfulness and systemic injustice. Whenever God's people forgot their humble beginnings they'd drift into imperialistic greed and oppress the weak until an Empire would rise up to conquer them.

Babylon was that empire in Isaiah's day and for 200 years the people sat in the wilderness of suffering, not knowing when their pain and humiliation would end, not knowing if they would ever return home. Imagine them weighed down by regret and guilt, without hope or the ability to picture a brighter future...without the means to save themselves or their loved ones...with only a faint cultural memory of better days to offer a shred of promise...

And then, suddenly, the winds change and a scent of hope is detected. After 200 years of Exile a word comes from God: "O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid..." The people have paid for their sins, 'doubly' in the language of Isaiah. They'd experienced the severest consequences for their selfishness and conceit. And now the wait for their perdition was over. They'd suffered for long enough.

A voice cries out...a voice quoted in all four gospels... 'prepare the way of the Lord!' God was coming; God's 'glory' was to be revealed. The wind was blowing, the grass bowing in submission to the breath of God, signs of an invasion of the supernatural. A herald rises, climbs to the mountain top, and is commissioned to proclaim good news, "Lift up your voice with strength...lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" The people living in Exile, under 200 years of suffering, doubting, fearing, and suffocating under guilty consciences, are to hear the voice: God is here. Everything is to change, radical newness has begun, a fresh vision of the future is pictured...and over time the people of God do return home. Yet not all of their prayers were answered, there was still something worth waiting for...

Centuries pass and the people of God find themselves once again in the solitariness of silence. Once again they were left wondering what they'd done to deserve their fate. Once again they questioned whether God was for them or against them. Daily routines were small comforts to the anguished hearts and depressed spirits of the people. Dared they to hope that God would once again 'tear open' the heavens?

A fisherman out in his boat in the Sea of Galilee detects a strange scent in the air as the wind gains strength. A woman gathering water at the town well is almost knocked over by the sudden invisible force riding over the mountains. Children's voices playing in the fields are drowned out by the sound of a rushing wind carrying the word of God. And one witness is compelled to write,

"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."  
Mark's imagination is formed by the stories of the breath of God hovering over the waters as the word of God called creation into being. That was the first 'beginning'. And now another creation story will be told.

Mark's gospel is a fast-paced narrative with compelling characters like John the Baptist whose purpose is always to highlight the work of Jesus

the Christ, the Son of God. The first title carries the meaning of Christ as a Davidic warrior long hoped-for – the Messiah who would liberate the people of God. When Jesus asks his confidante, Peter, who he is, Peter responds quickly that Jesus is the Messiah, but he is not able to confess Jesus as the ‘Son of God’. For this title, ‘Son of God’, has connections with the ‘Suffering Servant’ figure of Isaiah’s time. Peter, and all of us reading Mark’s gospel, do not desire to see suffering as requisite for God’s saving work. It took a Roman soldier, beholding the battered and broken Jesus on the cross, to declare him the ‘Son of God’. A soldier, a man who knew violence and whose job it was to enforce Roman peace, perceived something awfully strange happening at Golgotha. Perhaps this one who spent his existence trying to enforce peace was, for the first time, truly seeing what peace costs. Maybe he caught a glimpse of the lengths God would go to be with God’s people – entering even into their deepest pain and tortured existence.

That is the end of Mark’s story, but it is also the beginning. Some scholars say the entirety of Mark’s gospel is simply a preamble to the Passion story as the narrative only makes sense in light of the end. We heard just the beginning today, of the herald of the good news, in this case, John the Baptist, proclaiming the way of the Lord. This mouthpiece of God was calling out to any who would hear that God’s presence, God’s kingdom, had come. And so he offered a ministry of forgiveness as both preparation for God’s kingdom and sign of God’s immediate presence. Into those murky, muddy waters of the River Jordan, the people came seeking peace. Like the long-suffering Hebrew people living in Exile, they sought a respite from their pain and assurance that God still loved them and was about to do a new thing in their midst. They brought with them their sin-stained memories, regrets, and fears.

Jesus too would arrive at the Jordan, and humbly make his way into these waters sullied by the worst things humanity has ever done. Jesus enters into our filth, our guilt, and immerses his life in it. In his own baptism Jesus identifies with us and physically enacts Isaiah’s

pronouncement that the people had suffered long enough. God hears our prayers; God's presence is with us. There are new days ahead.

A young man is incredibly anxious facing Christmas this year. In the past 8 months he's struggled to come to terms with anxiety and depression as his marriage deteriorated. In his brokenness he looked for comfort in the wrong places: alcohol and a female coworker. He desperately wanted to be a good husband, but his marriage could not be salvaged, and his career was put on hold as he struggled to make sense of what had become of his life. Each night before he'd fall asleep he'd pray never to wake up – this was the only prayer he could muster during this time. He had once been considered a strong man of faith, but deep resentment towards God and a judgmental church strangled any hope of spiritual consolation.

He didn't speak much with his family, fearing their conservative ideals would lead them to reject him as well. But one sister, Amy, reached out to him in little ways over the months – a phone message here, an e-mail there – and she invited him to come home for Christmas. A friend, John, also remained in his life through this dark time, and with much cajoling ensured the young man got the professional help he needed. The dark cloud was softening in intensity, but he was still terrified to face those who knew and loved him before his great ordeal.

With strength he didn't know he still possessed, the young man knocked on his parents' door. As if sensing his presence, the entire family was waiting together just on the other side. Amy rushed forward to pull him in, embracing him in her arms. He broke down in tears, sobbing like he never had before. And as he listened to the music playing in the background he discerned it as an advent hymn whose words suddenly sprang to life: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." He saw himself among the people of God of old and could finally hear the Voice speaking peace into his heart: he had suffered enough, he was forgiven, he was no longer held captive by grief and despair, God, Emmanuel, had come. Amen.