

Sunday December 6th: 8:30 am
Sermon Series/Message: Holy Darkness
Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 40: 1-11
Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

**We are beginning a new sermon series entitled
“Holy Darkness.**

- This is a new sermon series that is seeking to find the beauty and holiness in darkness.
- For it is my observation that although the Word tells us that God created both light and darkness, sometimes the concept of darkness is not depicted as anything that is to be worshipped or revered.
- From scary movies that typically occur in the dark; to the different hues of our skin tones that ranges from light to dark;
- It is my experience that the narrative that comes with darkness often reflects some notion of fear, something ominous or something to be avoided altogether.

- Typically darkness from a more abstract or symbolic perspective also denotes some level of discomfort for many of us.
- For instance, when you hear someone say things like, “that was a dark period in my life,” or “there was a feeling of darkness that came over me,” the majority of us would conclude that the person must have been experiencing a time of turmoil, depression or immense grief and anguish.
- Along these same lines, what most of us are experiencing in this Advent season, could be described as darkness as well.
- For instance, my brother-in-law (Steve’s brother) Andy is in the hospital as we speak with complications from Covid-19.
- Stephen also learned in the same week that one of his former boss’s mother will be taken off of life support from complications of Covid.

- Not to mention, the level of divineness, racial tension, food insecurity, financial instability; all the while being estranged from our loved ones or in some cases confined with our loved ones through all of this is quite stressful.
- For many of us, these times that I have described and more are so dark for us; that I know I am going to have a huge theological challenge and task convincing any of us that these dark times can perhaps be holy?
- Hellacious yes....but not holy!
- For where is the holiness in losing our loved ones without warning?
- Where is the holiness in being estranged from our loved ones?
- Where is the holiness when some of us are in extreme fragile financial situations that are threatening our ability to live comfortably?

- Yet this is the sermon series the Spirit of the Lord is beckoning me to preach through Advent.
- And so week to week, the task will be to journey through the stories of scripture; identifying the sometimes literal/figurative/symbolic/abstract darkness; and discovering how the the Holy Spirit will breath holiness into those situations;
- With the hope that you and I will discover the holy moments in our own dark situations....
- So I invite us all to continue to explore darkness and examine how it speaks to us over these next few weeks.
- Because my theological intuition is that we might be surprised during this Advent journey;
- We might be surprised by what darkness reveals to us;
- We might be surprised by what darkness teaches us;
- We might be surprised that darkness has a tremendous purpose in our lives;

- We might be surprised to learn that darkness in fact needs to be here; in fact in some cases that darkness deserves to be here, just as much as the light;
- We might even be surprised like in the animation movie “Inside Out”; the story of main character Riley where the audience journeys through her emotions -- led by Joy (Amy Poehler) -- that try to guide her through her difficult, life-changing events in her life; we might be surprised to learn that just as joy and sadness go hand in hand; that light and darkness goes hand in hand as well;
- For the light is sometimes not as meaningful or relevant without the darkness;
- Sometimes the light cannot be fully revealed without the darkness;
- So this is the purpose of us wrestling through the mystery and awe of darkness; taking the time to see what darkness has to say to us;

- And so segueing into our scriptural lesson today in Isaiah;
- I stopped by to say that darkness has a lot to tell us in this passage;
- For the symbolic and somewhat abstract darkness that I am seeing within this Israelite community's story;
- A community that has evolved over several generations, but are the same descendants of those Israelites who were led out of Egypt by Moses and Aaron;
- The darkness that is being revealed in this text is the **wilderness**.

- Now it is important to understand that the connection of the words **in the wilderness** in this particular passage of scripture is ambiguous in the Hebrew and in the unpunctuated Septuagint.
- For this scriptural sentence in our passage of scripture where it says wilderness in (Isa. 40: 3) is comparing it

to the deliverance with the exodus from Egypt, when God led the people out across a desert (as in 11:16; 19:23);

- But I stopped by to suggest that these people of the passage today are not in that same wilderness;
- You see God always keeps God's promises.
- God has the power to make them, and God has the power power to fulfill them.
- So I will reiterate this is not the same wilderness of Egypt that they were in.
- For those that were obedient in the newer generation of Israelites led by Joshua was able to enter into the Promise Land after being in the wilderness for 40 years;
- However, although the Israelites who went into the promised land with Joshua were generally faithful and obedient, as a nation Israel soon returned to their old ways and lost the blessings promised to them of winning the whole land.

- So you can say that the wilderness of those descendants of our text today was in a sort of new wilderness situation;
- And the reason why I say sort of is because the adaptable phrase “ You can take the people out of Egypt, but you can’t take the Egypt out of the people applies in this situation.
- Because although the oppressor of Pharaoh that led them into their first wilderness experience was long gone by now,
- Our Israelite friends teaches us that if you and I never learn from our wilderness experiences the first time around (hello somebody);
- You and I will keep going through the same wilderness experiences over and over and over again until we do; oh I know I am telling someone’s story today!
- To share an example of what I am talking about although I know some of you are already on my same

train of thought; but I thought about my own situation of how I finally found love with my husband now;

- And let me just put the disclaimer out here that I am not bragging with you all about our love, I am just testifying to you if that's alright;
- But the reason why I believe God had me staying single for so long is because like the old saying, "you better check yourself before you wreck yourself,"
- The Holy Spirit I know put me in what I would like to call a quarantine dating isolation chamber station;
- And that is because I was about to wreck myself again
- You see from my not learning from my previous wilderness relationship experiences;
- I kept attracting the same type of individuals that was just not the type of person I needed to be with;
- So it wasn't until I went through a period of isolation that involved me focusing on my girls and focusing on my ministry coupled with years of counseling, therapy

and prayer that I began to learn from my past mistakes and failures;

- That I began to learn who and whose I was;
- That I began to learn how to get out of those wilderness relationship experiences for once and for all;
- And this lesson that I shared does not just apply to dating or relationships church;
- This lesson applies to life;
- This lesson applies to our Israelite friends of Jerusalem in our text today;
- That when you and I do not take the time to learn from our wilderness experiences the first time;
- These wilderness experiences will keep happening to us until we do!

- **So this is furthermore why I am identifying the wilderness as darkness in this passage;**
- Because extrapolating this wilderness experience from this scriptural passage back to our own individual lives;
- You and I also know that when these wilderness experiences keep happening, it can be a period of literal darkness for most of us.
- Because I would like to think that none of us are consciously choosing to stay in the wilderness are we?
- But sometimes it is difficult to see how to get out of the wilderness in my opinion.
- The answer of how to get out of the wilderness can seem so simple to the onlooker looking from the outside in!
- But when you are directly in the situation, sometimes the path of freedom is not as clear or easy to act upon.

- As readers of the Israelite story we can easily say to the Israelites, “how can you not get it?.....just listen and obey God already and you will be fine!”
- However I would imagine if we too were these people, perhaps we would be in the same predicament.
- How do I make this hypothesis you may be wondering?
- Well for example, I found myself reading up on the Spanish Flu of 1918 finally;
- I found myself brave enough to finally look up how long a similar pandemic lasted in the US and world and how long it finally came to an end.
- I was horrified to discover that it took roughly 2 years to run its course; this was due to people eventually passing away from it or herd immunity being developed;
- And ironically some of the same health mandates were given back then including the recommendation of wearing masks.

- The somewhat good news was that back then most of the US complied although there were some who resisted this mandate altogether by refusing to wear the mask or they poked holes in them;
- But still the sobering news is that with even most complying; the outcome from the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918 was estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least **50 million** worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States.
- So that was the first wilderness experience, from an influenza epidemic standpoint;
- Fast forwarding to the Covid 19 epidemic today; finally mask use is high at 80 percent usage; but we all know what a painstaking process getting folks to comply has been for our world;
- Not to mention, we are at 1.5 M more deaths globally not quite a year into this pandemic.

- And my ultimate response to all of this is to identify that although is different time period; we are virtually in the same wilderness.
- In our scriptural passage today, different time period; but essentially the same wilderness;
- Making it known again that the wilderness of both the text and where we are today is the symbolic darkness and the literal darkness for most of us because the answer of how to get out seems so simple, yet it is difficult for us to see our way out;
- **And where the Holy moment comes in this text of Isaiah that hopefully you and I can begin to detect is lo and behold the hope of the Advent season;**
- Because looking at our text today, the reason why I spent so much time describing the darkness of the text and connecting that to our darkness today that I am naming to be the wilderness, is because the greater message of our Isaiah passage is that a Savior is finally going to come and help this

community out of the wilderness hopefully once and for all;

- Our passage today is basically saying to these people that through all of their leaders that have helped them on the journey up until their present day; Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Caleb and so on;
- The prophet Isaiah was lifting up that the ultimate leader would be coming to lead them out of their wilderness once and for all;
- The commandment in the opening part of this scripture, **Comfort oh, comfort my people**, was a poetic way of saying that God will comfort God's people now;
- And the comforter that would come by way of this Advent season would be Jesus.
- So what this meant for this new Israelite generation is that they had another chance to get out of the wilderness again!

- The Israelites who had a taste of the metaphorical land of milk and honey had another opportunity to take heed of God's instructions and be led out of the wilderness once and for all;
- This was the Holy moment that they were being prepared for.
- This was a Holy moment that could change the course of their lives for the better;
- **That church is always the beauty that comes with the Advent season;**
- For Advent literally means the coming or second coming of Christ;
- So with each year that Advent comes around the liturgical calendar;
- This is not an occasion that is to be ritualized;
- This is not an occasion that I would recommend any of us to take for granted;
- Because my aha moment is that there is a reason for the Advent season;

- Think about it, if all is well, I would imagine that Christ would have been perfectly content to marvel with the Triune God;
- But even in our free will abilities that I preached about a couple of weeks ago, when God's people cry out to the hills for help;
- God provides help;
- For me this is one aspect of God's Grace;
- Grace for me in this instance is even if we don't choose to exercise help from God in our free will moments, God still offers help to us;
- Like a mama bear ready to protect her cubs;
- God is ready to protect her sheep;
- God is anxious to gather his flock;
- Like 2 Peter 3:9 says ***The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you,[a] not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.***

- So the question that the people of Jerusalem was going to have to decide and the question that the people of today are going to have to decide is how we will respond when Advent comes;
- When Advent comes will we be ready?
- When Advent comes will we be waiting?
- The announcement is being declared as loud and crystal clear as can be, that the Lord God Himself is coming as Ruler (v. 10a), Deliverer (v. 10b), and Shepherd (v. 11).
- This is the promise that the Advent season brings.
- A season that can be the most fulfilling, climatic, holy experience we have ever imagined;
- A season where the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and the hope is that all people will see it together;
- * So advent is here, advent is now;
- * The ultimate question is are we willing to grasp hold of all that Advent is offering us?

Sunday December 6: 10:45a
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First Lesson: Psalm 85: 1-2; 8-13
Gospel Lesson: Mark 1: 1-8
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- For it is my observation that although the Word tells us that God created both light and darkness, sometimes the concept of darkness is not depicted as anything that is to be worshipped or revered.
- From scary movies that typically occur in the dark; to the different hues of our skin tones that ranges from light to dark;

- It is my experience that the narrative that comes with darkness often reflects some notion of fear, something ominous or something to be avoided altogether.
- Typically darkness from a more abstract or symbolic perspective also denotes some level of discomfort for many of us.
- So the goal of our Advent series is to locate the darkness within the scriptures week to week whether it be literal, figurative, symbolic or abstract and discover the holy moments and opportunities that is within those dark moments.
- And looking at our gospel today, I am encouraging us all to check out part 1 of this message, because in doing this, we will discover that the darkness is ironically the same in the Isaiah 40 text and our gospel today.
- The darkness that I am identifying is located in the wilderness;

- Now keep in mind, the wilderness experience that is being alluded to, is the time period where the Israelites had escaped Pharoah from Egypt and circled around the wilderness for 40 years before entering into the Promise Land;
- However as I revealed in the earlier message, the Isaiah 40 passage is not exactly referring to the same wilderness situation.
- This is because the Israelite generations from before did eventually make it to the Promise Land under the leadership of Joshua;
- However hundreds of years later, because the Israelite generation began to fall into the same patterns of forgetting who and whose they were; children of the Lord;
- As a result they lost some of their promised land;
- Leaving this newer generation in a similar puzzling wilderness experience again;

- Now upon hearing this news in today's time, we as the church might be tempted to offer advice to our Israelite community; advice that might suggest for this community to just get back on track with God by taking heed to God's instructions and wisdom and guidance and all will be well;
- But we also should know by now that hindsight is 20/20.
- Not to mention when you are in the wilderness, it is easy to be blinded by the obvious.
- So you see the reason why this Isaiah 40 passage is complimentary to our gospel today because the people were promised a comforter in Isaiah 40; and in our gospel today, we are about to witness that promise being fulfilled.
- Jesus was coming soon to show them the way through their darkness if they were willing to follow.
- So the best way to tackle our gospel today is by attempting to explore the final question that I asked in

the earlier sermon that focused on the Isaiah 40 lesson; “when Advent comes, will we be ready to grasp hold of the promises that comes with the season of Advent which literally means the coming of Christ or in our case the second coming of Christ?

- My aha moment of our gospel today and why it is partnered with our Isaiah lectionary reading also is that the passage of Mark today teaches us how to grasp hold of the Advent season and that is through our baptism.
- You see about 8 years ago, one of my ordination requirements was to write a 3-4 page response on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and since then I think I can articulate our baptism in far simpler terms and far fewer pages.
- Because you see church with baptism, there is no power in the water itself.

- There is no ritual that you and I can ever do that will automatically make us perfect or mistake free although I wish there was.
- In fact in a lot of predominantly Black churches with Black preachers that I have experienced, they would often say in our baptism that you can go down a dry devil and still come up a wet devil!
- The theology in that is that the water does not change us;
- The water and the entire baptism ceremony is an act of symbolism to say that number one, the baptized individual is now entering into an affirming community that has committed to living a life of love and service to God through their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness and number 2; the individual being baptized by the water, represents a symbol of God's Grace being activated and acknowledged over that individual's life;

- In response, the water placed on the individual's head is a symbol of the person's intention to leading a life of repentance and renewal; thereby accepting a life of love and service and membership to the mission of Jesus Christ.
- Furthermore when we baptize our babies and children, we are professing as a community; to help the parents and guardians of that baby/child to raise them up in the love, life and service of Jesus; with the hope that through the child's Confirmation experience that can start as early as the 6th grade; the child will be ready to make this commitment to service and membership of the church themselves.
- So you see our baptism is how we respond as a church to the coming of Jesus
- Our baptism is how we respond to the Advent season;
- For our baptism is a living witness of our commitment to Jesus and Jesus ways

- Our baptism is a sign of our intentions and commitment to serve and share our gifts of service in God's kingdom
- So this is why I am suggesting that our baptism is our answer to Advent, because it doesn't only suggest that we are preparing for Jesus;
- Our baptism signifies our commitment to work towards God's kingdom until thy kingdom come thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.
- So this is the reason for the urgency behind John the Baptist's invitation in our gospel today.
- **For the holy moment** that is going to come through the wilderness;
- **The holy moment** that is getting ready to come through the darkness is an opportunity for us all to come upon better days;
- **This will be the moment** where our Matthew 25 text that I preached on a couple of weeks will really come into fruition;

• **It will be a holy moment** where *All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;*

35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** *Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

- ***This church will be the holy moment*** where our baptismal vows of living out our prayers, presence, gifts , service and witness will really come into play;
- **This will be the holy moment** where we must be like the wise bridesmaids and have enough oil on hand;
- This church is how we grasp hold of the promises that will come through the Advent seasons **while we wait;**
- We keep working to do more good in the world;
- **While we wait**, we keep seeking ways to show God's love more;
- **While we wait**, we keep living a life of commitment of doing no harm in the world;
- **While we wait**, we keep on working towards spreading more service throughout the world; **that will** set the captives free; **that will** produce life and liberty to the oppressed; **that will** inspire those who

have been made to feel unclean recognize their sacred worth and value to God and God's kingdom;

- **This is the holy moment** of how you and I grasp hold of the Advent season;
- For it is living out the work of our baptism that will help us to get through the darkness.
- Let the Church say Amen!