

Solidarity - A way that emerges

Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

Rev. Sharon Smith

“Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her”

I am grateful for these familiar words that George Frederik Handel set to music. And that usually each year around Christmas we get to enjoy in performances around the city and even sing-alongs in the Orpheum. This year we can enjoy these in our pyjamas and slippers as we tune in virtually to online concerts.

Hearing these words during times in our lives when grief is stirred and rises to the surface gives voice to so much of the pain you and I as human beings walk with. Common human gritty experience no matter what generation we are born into.

These are words penned after Israel’s exile by a prophet also called Isaiah. A second voice crying out.

The first Isaiah (writing chapter 1-39) cried out warning the nations that the injustice among them was not the way of God. Warning the nation of their demise.

Some 150 years later – another Isaiah (second Isaiah) cries out, **this time in solidarity** offering comfort to a nation who had been traumatized by the experience of exile.

In the wilderness prepare a way... a way for the Lord. A way of **solidarity**.

Behind this second door of advent, we meet people in history who have bravely forged a way where there is no path.

On the Chilkoot Trail (Alaska into BC) one of my clergy colleagues was told the differences between a path, a trail and a route. A path is well worn, usually the easiest way, used by many, easily found. A trail takes us through wilder country. We need to look a little harder to find the way at times. A route is a temporary way around unexpected obstacles like a fast flowing stream or an unstable snowpack.

Bravely one person cries out, and bravely the second person follows in solidarity. Even if the way is overgrown with bush and thorns. Hacking our way through – straining to believe we are heading somewhere, and that this way will lead us there. It’s the followers – the second, third and fourth person on the way who make the way possible.

Their solidarity, camaraderie that makes a route, a trail and eventually a path.

I often turn to the writings of Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron. She wrote the book: When things Fall Apart during a time living with chronic fatigue syndrome. Also called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) it is a complex, fatiguing, long-term medical condition.

It was during this time that she took on a teacher. A way of wisdom emerged for her out of her suffering. The way became a path.

She writes: “The path is the goal”

“This path is one very distinct in characteristic – it is not prefabricated. It doesn’t already exist. The path that we are talking about is the moment by moment evolution of our experience, the moment by moment evolution of the world of phenomena, the moment by moment evolution of our thoughts and emotions.

The path is uncharted. It comes into existence moment by moment and at the same time it drops away behind us. We can’t see where we are headed, only where we have been. Now is the only time. How we relate to it creates the future.”

Pema Chodron “Things fall apart”

Podcast – book discussion: <https://onbeing.org/programs/devendra-banhart-when-things-fall-apart/>

And it is how I read Thomas Merton’s wisdom also.

Not to remain at a compassionate distance but to find ourselves where we are and engage the people, the tasks, the call right around us. **Here, now, this.**

This is our way.

Friends, we are a community who follows the way of Jesus. For this we make no apologies. There are other ways. This is our way.

The life of Jesus made a way of solidarity. And we, the followers, now called the church walk this way. Sometimes the way is a route, sometimes a trail, sometimes a path.

Like John, Jesus’ life began in the wilderness. But their ways diverted.

John

- An ascetic probably an Essene part of the Qumran community
- Lived alone in the wilderness in his animal skins
- Feasted on locusts and honey
- Preaching a message of turning toward God and inner preparation
- Followed the classic path of renunciation, he had left behind family, friends, and earthly pleasures in order to dedicate himself entirely to this way of God.

Seeing Jesus through the eyes of the Wisdom traditions we notice that...

- after his baptism he entered the wilderness days of testing and pruning.
- But what looks like an ascetic from the outside may not prove to be so from the insider.

- From his subsequent actions we come to understand that Jesus was not as much denying himself earthly food but was internally feasting on the Word of God.
- He was being formed inwardly initiated into the radical new path he would soon reveal to the world.
- John decreasing and Jesus increasing is a new era which is about to begin.
- Jesus lays out a self-emptying path toward union with God.
- A complete self-emptying – a full singleness and purity of heart.

Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Jesus

Contemporary theologian Tripp Fuller, in his book *Divine Self Investment*, Fuller, focuses on the words of John the Baptizer – I baptize with water, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Fuller says that Jesus is the fruit of the ongoing investment of God in the world. Jesus images the Spirit. The material reality of God. And Jesus leads us to this Christ consciousness – a possibility to live into a deeper faithfulness to God, one that doesn't just receive possibility as an individual but as a community.

Podcast: On the Way: an interview with Tripp Fuller
<https://anglicanipilly.org.au/on-the-way-podcast/>

We follow in solidarity...

The church then becomes this image of the Spirit.

We are a community of practice.

And in each era, a new trail/path is forged.

I want to end with the story of a little church on the East Coast of South Africa.

In 1882 **Norwegians Settled in a little town known as Marburg.**

On 29 August 1882 a group of two hundred and twenty-nine Norwegians landed at the mouth of the Umzimkulu River, then known as Alfred County in Southern Natal. They arrived in the Port Shepstone area because of a colonisation scheme launched in Norway in 1880. In terms of this scheme each Settler was given a 100 acre plot of land, including one for the church. Reverend Emil Berg had come with these settlers as their pastor and so, on the first Sunday after their arrival, a service was held on the hillside of Lot 17. A church was built, originally using mud bricks, but later these were encased with fired bricks. This building was dedicated on the First Anniversary of the landing of these men and women, and the Norwegian Settlers Church had its first home. It is the longest serving church in Southern Natal.

Toward the end of the 20th century, a desire was growing in the remaining small group of Norwegian families, settlers on African land, to offer care for the lives of the people around them. Sure... questions about how to grow their church were alive, but they chose not to focus there. Rather they started a trust. The Genesis trust. This was a new way an offshoot of an old path.

As they paid attention to the people around them in the neighborhood, they saw the devastating effects of parentless families, unemployment, poverty and crime, and they joined them in solidarity. Together they were inspired to create a series of community/youth projects. A mechanic shop, a hospice, an ESL program.

The church grew. **Though** this was never the only focus. Solidarity with the community was the path. And the path was the goal.

<https://www.geneshope.co.za>

As we stand at the threshold of Advent Door 2...

I wonder what paths inspire you?
I wonder what you are facing and what you need?

There are women and men crying out to you.
Comfort, prepare, turn, follow.

You are not alone.
Amen.