

## ***“A voice cries out”***

**December 4, 2011**

*Text: Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8*

### I.

We’ve all known people like Danny. A minister from up north tells the story. Danny is homeless and he first appeared at the door, a few years back, in the early evening of a cold, mid-December day. The thing we need to know about Danny is that he always needs something: food, money, clothing, shelter ... something.

At Christmas time, in particular, it’s hard to shut the door on Danny. It’s hard not to shell out a few dollars, share some food or clothing, or assist him with shelter. The guilt of rejecting the needy at Christmas is not something many of us are eager to experience.

Over time, as we learn more about him, we become almost accustomed to Danny.

- He gets a few days of work here ... a few more days of work there.
- People make phone calls on his behalf. But, still, no matter what we do, nothing seems to work out for very long.

However, as it turns out, Danny is not just any homeless person. He’s a homeless person with a one-line sermon. To a chosen few—particularly to any ministers among his benefactors—upon receiving whatever handout or assistance, his departing words are:

***Reverend, is this the way it’s supposed to be?***

Over time, this can be a tough indictment. These harsh words have a bite to them—and, again, particularly at Christmas. Because we know—decidedly—that this is *not* the way it’s supposed to be. People are supposed to have a home, a place to live; they’re supposed to have sufficient food and clothing, the basic necessities of life.

The truth is, we’re troubled by stories like Danny’s—and particularly at Christmas. We want our lives to be cozy and snugly and homey ... with everyone gathered around the manger scene ... with the baby Jesus resting safely in Mary’s arms and Joseph nearby ... and with the shepherds rejoicing and the wise men sharing their gifts. We like the Hallmark Christmas Card version of Christmas.

### II.

But, of course, that’s not the world we live in. In both of our readings for this morning, ***a voice cries out***. With the prophet, **Isaiah**—his people locked in Babylonian Exile, it’s a voice of hope. After years of protest, years of deep, lamentation, suffering and defeat, ***a voice cries out***.

CHECK IT OUT: A new day is on the cusp of being born. And that new day is Israel's long, hoped-for return to her homeland. Isaiah seeks to lift up the hopes of his people.

***In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.***

***Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.***

***Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.***

The prophet cries out for a new day ... for a day when justice will prevail, a day when suffering will cease and misery will be no more. The word from the prophet is: *enough, enough already*. **Israel has suffered enough.**

This *voice crying out* was coming from a deep place, from a place of deep hurt and pain, from a deep-down place of suffering, deprivation and shame. It's a voice of protest: ***This cannot be the way it's supposed to be?***

It's time now, therefore, for God's justice to be revealed ... and for Israel to discover again the God of her ancestors, the God of the Exodus, the God who comes with a mighty arm and rescues God's people; the God who cannot—who will not—*let Israel go*.

***Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, the prophet cries out.  
Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings!  
Lift it up ... do not fear ... say to the cities of Judah, Here is your God!***

***See, the Lord comes with a mighty arm of rescue.***

Again, ***a voice cries out ...***

### III.

In **Mark's** gospel, ***a voice cries out*** as well. It's a familiar voice, the voice of John the Baptist, sounding out from the wilderness. John picks up on the theme of Isaiah. In his day, some five hundred years later, a new day is about to be born. In John the Baptist's day, too, people have been waiting, hoping, looking:

- waiting for God's Messiah to be born ...
- waiting for God's justice to break upon them ...
- waiting for someone to make the crooked straight and the uneven ground level and the rough places a plain.

We hear voices crying out today as well, don't we? Voices of protest and yearning from all sides.

1. Voices of unrest in many of our cities ... voices of inequity and injustice: ***Is this the way it's supposed to be?***
2. We hear voices eager for a change that leads to a more level playing field; voices eager for hope to rise up from decades of indifference and greed.
3. We hear voices on behalf of *the least of these*, the ones who—everyday—are shoved further to the sidelines of opportunity, possibility and fairness; the ones for whom—everyday—the future is a little more closed and hope seems a little more distant.

***A voice cries out!***

And for what does it cry out? Isn't it a cry for hope and possibility? Isn't it a cry to be heard and to be seen and to not go unnoticed? Again—***Reverend, is this the way it's supposed to be?***

Israel had been locked in Babylonian Exile for fifty years. She'd been beaten down, lost everything. But over time, from her point of view, she'd had paid her price—to the point where—there was the sense—that her punishment was disproportionate to her sin.

For how long, she wondered, would the heavy hand of God be upon her? For how long would hopelessness and despair fill her long nights? For how long would she be cut off from both her past and any desirable future? ***A voice cries out!*** And it's a voice of protest.

Often in our lives, what we most want and need is someone to listen ... someone to listen to our story, to hear our lament, our burden. We want to *know* that we are seen, heard, valued and loved.

#### IV.

Think about your lives!

1. Aren't there times when we wish we would have spoken up, or that someone would have spoken on our behalf?
2. Aren't there times when we wish we would have registered our discontent? Times when we wish we would have shouted out our truth? Made our protest? Stood our ground?

***A voice cries out: Reverend, is this the way it's supposed to be?***

There are times, friends, when our silence speaks so loudly that it paralyzes us; times when our inaction dampens hope and sounds a note of discouragement that runs throughout our spirit.

In the grip of life's unfairness and injustice ... in the throes of our fears and anxieties, a voice cries out.

- It's the voice of a *prophet* from on high ...
- or it's *John the Baptist* in the wilderness of our lives. It's a voice that reminds us—every year, but every day, really—of *the way it's supposed to be*.

And this way is a way of love and compassion. It's a way of mutual caring, support and shared generosity. It's a way of peace with justice, a way of fairness with equal opportunity for all. It's a way of optimism and hope.

It's a way that bends us toward God ...

- that makes the crooked straight and the rough places a plain ...
- that opens us to the fruits of the spirit ...
- and that leads us to the manger at Bethlehem that invites all people in.

It's a way that moves us closer to *the way it's supposed to be*.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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