

Second Sunday of Advent, Cycle B

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11 and Mark 1:1-8

Let me tell you a story about two families. A friend of mine is a single mom who struggles to get by after leaving an abusive marriage. She bought a small house, far from her ex, in a rural community. Her mother had planned to move there as well, but then a series of health crises kept her from being able to move. For two years, my friend and her mother have lived five hours apart. Her mother's health continues to decline and my friend cannot even drive to see her because of the pandemic. Meanwhile, in the same community, another woman works as a Catholic school teacher to support her disabled husband and three children. They have outgrown their tiny one-story house. They moved into a bigger house but could not find a buyer in this small, poor community.

My friend still gets emails from a realtor – emails she always deletes. One day, she was moved to open the email instead. The ad showed a tiny house within walking distance of her home, a house that looks remarkably like her mother's home five hours away. Within days of this mysterious impetus to click, both families got what they needed, a financial burden lifted for one and a family reunited for the other. My friend told me, "The rest of my troubles do not really bother me; something will work out. I usually wait to turn to God until I have run out of options. Now I have seen that God is taking care of me. And I am telling you because I thought it would make you happy. I am telling everyone."

This is the Good News happening in our time. My friend is preaching the gospel; how often do we do the same? Catholics like to say, "Preach the gospel always; if necessary, use words." This noble prompt to embody the gospel can also be an excuse not to talk about it. This Sunday's passages from Isaiah and Mark remind us to proclaim the gospel with our mouths. Look at all the "speaking" verbs in Isaiah:

- "Comfort, give comfort;"
- "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her;"
- "A voice cries out;"
- "For the mouth of the Lord has spoken;"
- "Cry out at the top of your voice; and
- "Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God."

Most of these verbs are imperatives, God commanding us to speak. This passage was written when the Babylonian Empire had fallen and the Israelites were free to return home. But Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed and the Israelites had lived for several generations in Babylon. God needed someone to reconnect God with these disenfranchised people and so they could know their reality. When God said, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," God meant "to the Israelites" because the city no longer existed. They had become God's Holy City and Temple, God's dwelling place on earth. Even as slaves in a foreign land, God was on their side. At this point, God commanded them to be heralds who declare this truth. God wanted them to be like my friend, able to recognize God's support amidst the struggles, to see that the bigger picture has so much more God in it than we are often willing to admit.

There is a chain of events here: we proclaim the need to be open to God, then we remove the barriers and then God comes and "the glory of the Lord [is] revealed." This phrase usually described God's presence in the Temple. It reemphasizes that God dwells in our lives and in our hearts. When we cry out the truth about God, "all people shall see it together." God saves, but our role is to vocally draw people's attention to God's works. Simply telling others good news has a far-reaching impact.

In Mark, John the Baptist's proclamation had an impact. Rural and urban people alike came to hear him. He is a great example of taking the first verse of this gospel seriously. Verse 1 is a title, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God." Notice that the Greek word for gospel, *euaggelíou*, is a present-tense action, the telling of good news; the gospel is not a book on a shelf or a past event. Because it is an action, Mark calls this book the beginning of the telling of the good news that is from Jesus, about Jesus and is Jesus. Jesus begins to tell the good news. God commands us to continue to tell others, just as my friend is doing.

- ❖ What story of God's love do you have to tell others?
- ❖ Who needs to hear this good news? How can you share it with them?