

February 7, 2021 Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 40-21-31 Mark 1:29-39

"Long Distance Relationships"

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In my younger years I had a series of long distance relationships. I was involved with someone living in London while I was in New York, or someone living in Virginia when I was in California. And this was back in the day, before cell phones, and texting when a long distance phone call was a financial investment.

As many of you know, these kind of relationships can be a bit of a roller coaster. There are the exhilarating moments of reunions, after so much waiting, of finally being face to face. And there are the times of frustration and misunderstanding that can arise from long period of times without significant meaningful contact.

In long distance relationships you have to work hard to keep up healthy emotional intimacy. You have to be patient. You have to be attentive. You have to be trusting. You have to accept that some days will be hard and not quite make much sense.

This morning I would like to propose that our lectionary readings are showing us that sometimes it can feel as if we are in a long distance relationship with the divine. Sometimes we can experience a rough patch in our relationship with God. In our text from Isaiah forty we are in the part of the book known as Second Isaiah. It was believed these prophetic words were shared with the people of Israel while they were in exile. They

had been taken from the land promised to them by their God and were far away from the Temple where they believed the divine dwelled. They could not help but feel that God was too far away to be of any help to them. In the midst of their hopelessness, Isaiah brings a counter-cultural message which opens with a series of rhetorical questions, questions that wonder how they could possibly be without hope. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?"

In one of our human long-distance relationships this would be the moment when one person starts to doubt the other person because they have been apart so long and the other person says, "What are you doing? Do you not remember who I am?" And in case exiled Israelites did not know the answer to these questions, it is quickly revealed, "It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." In other words, I am never too far away from you. You are never beyond my reach. I always have the power to save you.

And, if the Israelites are still struggling and sniffing over the phone about how hard all of this perceived distance is we get another round of rhetorical questions, "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" We get promises of what it will all look like with what could be my favorite sentence in all of scripture, "Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk not faint." In a human to human long distance relationship this would be, "Don't worry, I

know how hard this has been but I promise I will take care of you. Our love is strong enough to overcome any difficulty.

There is no doubt about it, communication and trust can be difficult in long distance relationships, be they the ones we have with each other or the times when our relationship with God feels like it is long distance, even though that is not actually the case. We need reassurance. We need to be reminded of how much we are loved. Our scripture text from the Gospel of Mark is not about long distance at all, at least at first.

We have Jesus, right on the ground in our midst; entering Simons's home and healing his mother-in-law, and healing many others who sought him out. But come morning, the disciples find that Jesus is not where they expected him to be. He had gone out, by himself, to a deserted place to pray. When they find Jesus what they say is "Everybody is looking for you." As opposed to the rhetorical questions of our first text, which are actually statements dressed up as questions, this is a question dressed up as a statement. What they are really saying is, "Everybody is looking for you, why the heck are you out here by yourself when so many people where we were want to be with you?" Jesus appears to ignore their question dressed up as a statement. He does not return with them to where they were before. Rather he leads them forward to where they have yet to be.

I am sure this left the disciples chagrined and confused and feeling distant from Jesus and his intentions. Why would he not return to the adoring crowds? Why would he turn from those who are seeking his healing this very moment? I am sure as they rushed to catch up with him they whispered a few questions to

each other about why he would not follow reasonable, human expectations.

And I suspect those Israelites in exile whispered a few questions to each other as Isaiah made his proclamations. If God is all powerful and promises to take care of us what are we doing in exile in the first place?

Both of these texts this morning speak to the distance we may experience at times from the divine. And, frankly, I am grateful for them. Considering that I often find myself befuddled by how God may or may not be at work in the world and in my life, I take great comfort in the reality that I am not alone in facing the challenges of what at times may feel like a long distance relationship.

I believe the truth is that for most, if not all of us, there are times when either God feels far away from us, or God's purposes simply elude us. Sometimes when we are told "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" We may feel like saying we have known and we have heard but it just does not seem all that palpably real at the moment. Yes, we know God, that you stretches out the heavens but the heavens are feeling kind of far away right now.

As far as God has travelled to be with us, even entering into the midst of our humanity in Jesus Christ, we will still have times when we experience a distance between ourselves and the divine. It is not a failure on our part nor certainly a failure on God's part. It is just an inherent element of the metaphysical geography of humanity and divinity.

So, how do we respond to this challenge? I think we need to make the same intentional choices that people in successful long distance relationships make. First, we need to be patient,

recognizing the context we are seeking to overcome. Second, we need to be attentive, to listen very carefully for what is being shared with us across the distance. And, third, we need to trust in the one reaching for us across that distance.

Being Patient. When we hit a dry patch in our spiritual life the least helpful thing to do is to get anxious about it. God is continually reaching out to us and will find a way to connect with us, even if it takes some time.

Attentiveness. When we cannot see any way that God is at work in our lives, we need to seek to be more intentional about listening for how God's still small voice may be whispering in our ear but is getting drowned out by the noise of our lives.

Trusting. When we begin to doubt that either God has the power to change our lives or that God loves us enough to change our lives, we need to remind ourselves of the powerful love we have experienced from God before and trust that the promises of that powerful love are sure and eternal.

Relationships can be hard. Long distance relationships can be particularly hard. So we should not be surprised if there are times in our lives when God feels distant or we do not understand exactly how God is at work in our lives.

Should those days come, being patient, attentive, and trusting will serve us well. Because God is never actually far away, whether we can recognize it all the time or not, God is ever and always beside us. God is just also leading us to where we have yet to be.

And if we are in need of a sentence of scripture in which to turn, remember Isaiah 40:31, "...those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as

eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Thanks be to God. Amen.