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Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

ROAD SIGNS

What we have today in our scripture are stories about three imprisonments. The first imprisonment involves John the Baptist. John has been arrested by Herod and thrown in prison. There he sits in a dark, damp, rat-infested prison cell. Who knows how long he has been there, when he sends a message to Jesus. And in the message we hear perhaps a tone of disillusionment and doubt. Even though John had been the one to baptize Jesus and had heard the voice from heaven declare about Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved," even though John had witnessed all this, there in the darkness of his prison cell, in his despair and suffering, John began to wonder. Is Jesus the one who will usher in the Kingdom of God? Have I been mistaken? Has my work and ministry and preaching all been in vain? Is Jesus the one or must we still wait for someone else?

In our own times of despair and darkness, might we have felt something similar? When the marriage falls apart, maybe we wonder if the love had ever been real or genuine. Or was it all our imagination? When the job lays us off, maybe we wonder what was the point of all that hard work, that commitment, all those extra hours of work with no extra pay. What was it all for? Or after enduring the hardship of chemotherapy--the nausea, the vomiting, the hair loss--only to be told there has been no meaningful change in the cancer, we may wonder, why did we go through all that? What was it for? Disillusionment is something we too have experienced.

So, disheartened and dispirited, John the Baptist sends his own followers to Jesus with a question: "Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?"

And Jesus sends back an answer. He says, "Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." In other words, he says "Go tell John about the signs you hear and see that the Kingdom of God is breaking in."

Of course, John would have understood that Jesus was quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah--the very passage we read today. By quoting Isaiah as his answer to John's question, Jesus was sending a message.

You see, the prophet Isaiah wrote to a group of people who were themselves held prisoner. This is our second story of imprisonment. The Jewish people of Isaiah's day were prisoners to the Babylonians, forced to live in exile far from their homeland. As captives in a place they didn't want to be, they become disheartened and disillusioned. All they wanted was to go home. And Jesus uses this text as a message to John the Baptist--because John would know the meaning behind that Isaiah passage. The meaning was that the God of liberation, the God of transformation was on the loose yet again.

Isaiah wrote to his people in captivity with a message of hope. God was going to bring them freedom. God was going to liberate them and let them go home. And Isaiah describes this liberation from their captivity with beautiful poetic words. He tells these captive people about the transformation God was about to unleash. First he talks about the transformation that God will bring about in the natural world--how the dry, thirsty, desert will be transformed. Water will gush through the desert, and flowers will bloom and everything will become verdant and lush and full of life. "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad," writes Isaiah, "the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and

singing." He adds, "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water."

Next, Isaiah goes on to speak about the life-giving transformation God will bring about for people. And not just any people. This transformation will take place for those people who suffer and are oppressed and who are disadvantaged in life. Isaiah writes that the weak and the fearful, the disabled and the poor will see a reversal of their circumstances. They will be liberated from their social and physical captivities. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer." This is the part that Jesus quotes back to John the Baptist. It's a message John would understand. The Kingdom of God is at hand, its breaking in. God is liberating and transforming.

That's what Isaiah's message was telling his people in captivity. God was going to liberate them from their imprisonment in Babylon and bring them home. And Isaiah speaks about the special highway God will create to lead the people out from their imprisonment and into freedom. It would be a holy way, and along that road home they would see signs that the realm of God was at hand--that God was present. The desert would blossom. The disabled and weak would be healed and strengthened. God was bringing about a transformation to all creation. You can see these signs.

This was the message that Jesus sends back to John the Baptist. Tell John, Jesus says to the messengers, tell John that just like with our ancestors, God is bringing about a new liberation, a new transformation. Tell John all you see and hear. For these are signs that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

These first two stories about John's imprisonment and the imprisonment of the Jewish people in exile are given to us to help us understand and respond to the third story of

imprisonment: our own. Here we sit in our own imprisonment of disillusionment and despair. Sometimes we are despair about ourselves and our own behaviors. We are disheartened with our lives, our shortcomings, our failures--with elements about ourselves we cannot seem to overcome. Or we are in despair about circumstances we face in life: an illness, a grief, a disappointment, a loss. Or we are disillusioned with the world around us--with family members who let us down, with bosses who don't treat us fairly, with the hate and greed we see embodied around us, with the political morass in our country, with the sufferings of the world. Imprisoned as we are to our own shortcomings, to our circumstances, to the world's darkness, we grow hopeless and lifeless.

And here is where those other two stories of imprisonment offer us hope. Liberation is offered to us. God is going to break open the doors of our imprisonment and lead us home. And remember how God created a special highway--a holy way--to lead the Jewish people out of their imprisonment to freedom? Well, a new highway to freedom is offered to us. Jesus is our highway. He's the road to freedom. He's the way that will lead us out of captivity and home again. That's what he was telling John the Baptist. In him we will find the road signs that God's realm is at hand. Look for the signs, he tells John: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have good news brought to them. Transformation and liberation are happening.

There are those who look to religion to help them transcend this life and its sufferings. They seek methods and practices and states of mind to rise above this world and its ugliness and its hardships. But Jesus did not come to help us transcend life. Instead, Jesus came to transform life. God loves this world. God loves this messed up, broken, imperfect world. And God loves you. God loves your messed up life and your imperfect self. And so God comes to transform us. God comes to liberate us from all that holds us captive and to lead us to our true home--the realm

of God. And the realm of God isn't some place far away. The realm of God isn't just some place we go after we die. Jesus tells us that the realm of God, the kingdom of God, is near at hand. It's within our reach right now. To help us find that place, our true home, the realm of God, God builds us a highway, a holy way. And that way is Jesus. It's the way of love. It's the way of compassion. It's the way of justice. It's the way of forgiveness. This way is the way through our imprisonment and the way out of our imprisonment--and to the life of liberation. And when you and I walk this holy way, we can see signs of transformation--within ourselves and among those we touch.

Where is God? Look for the signs, the road signs that reveal people are walking that holy way. Wherever there is love in response to hate, wherever there is generosity in response to greed, wherever the poor are noticed and cared about, wherever the stranger is welcomed and cared for, wherever the weak are given assistance, the homeless sheltered, the refugee given asylum, the Muslim respected, the gay and lesbian and transgendered person accepted, wherever people forgive and strive to reconcile, wherever justice is sought for people of all races and genders, wherever you see these transformations and liberations, you will have found signs of God's kingdom, God's realm, God's very presence. That holy way runs right out of our prisons cells and straight to the realm of God. Freedom is calling.