

There's a Wideness in Christ's Mercy
"A word behind you"
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 30:18-21
Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 4:14-16

You know ... I suppose we continue to learn a few things along life's journey in addition to mom's basic mantra: *Don't touch a hot stove; look both ways before you cross the street; nothing good happens after midnight.* We continue to add bits of wisdom to dad's all-purpose life instruction: *Go ask your mother.* Some things we learn through the tutelage of a master teacher. Other things only become ingrained through the torture of experience or a knuckle-headed mistake such as: If you realize you are out of milk after pouring your cereal into a bowl, orange juice is not really an adequate substitute. Hard won lessons that once learned or experienced, you will never forget.

I am among those who can safely claim that if I'm known as a first-class *anything*, it's not as a first-class flyer. I'm typically rushed through first-class like a kid being pulled by a grandparent at light-speed past the toy store in the hope that I won't actually notice the window display. *Wow, are those seats really that wide ... and she's already downed half a glass of champagne! What's going on here?* No, when they announce that all the

overhead bins are full, I'm among those who still have time for a sit-down meal at Chili's. We're into double digits: *Group 12 may now board ... Group 12 ... Anybody...? You, bald guy, what are you, Group 14? 15? Ah, go ahead and board now.*

Flying has changed. And you know I'm not paying that extra \$30 to choose a seat. I'll sit in that back row, middle seat for 4 hours, just to spite 'em. However, this week I learned an important lesson that, I am sure, will not be forgotten; a lesson revealing the genius behind the seat choice surcharge. The lesson? When flying, there actually is a seat worse than the middle seat, back row. You see, longer flights typically mean longer planes, and crowded longer planes embarking on longer flights mean more people taking more trips to the bathroom. To accommodate this, engineers included an additional lavatory on one side, about halfway through the cabin.

Well, boarding the red-eye from Utah with the blissful thought that I had scored an aisle seat in the seat assignment lottery, I was crestfallen to discover that mine was, inevitably, the one aisle seat (in the entire plane) that is located directly beside that mid-cabin lavatory. So, imagine a cross-country, red-eye flight, basking in the pungent aromas, the constant traffic,

the flash of blinding light in the darkened cabin, and the knowledge that with the endless relay race of seat mates next to me, the person seated to my immediate left was sitting on a toilet. With apologies to Mr. Rogers, who we will honor next week, it was not a beautiful night in the neighborhood. And that thirty dollars to choose your seat? At least for a long flight, it may well be worth every penny. Lesson learned. I don't think I'll forget that.

We learn a few things along life's journey, lessons we would do well to heed and remember; but sometimes we don't heed, we don't remember, we don't take it to heart, we don't pay attention; and we pay a heavy price for that. How many times will you hit your head on that pipe in your basement before you learn to duck? When will you learn the futility of getting outraged over the smallest thing; the destructiveness of insulting a friend; the self-harm of overscheduling; the idiocy of expressing everything that pops into your head; the danger of assuming your opinion is shared by everyone; or the folly of assuming you know more than you actually do? What lesson, what wisdom, what mentor, what advice, what instruction could prevent you from making the same mistake over and over again? Who do you look to for guidance, for correction? Where is wisdom accessible?

Today's text from Isaiah doesn't show up that often in public readings of scripture. It isn't in the lectionary, so it doesn't gain much notice in the liturgical year or gain much light from commentaries, Bible studies, or blogs. And that is a shame, because its context provides an important cautionary tale, and its content reveals the astounding depth of God's steadfast love. Isaiah ben Amoz was a prophet who grew up in proximity to the seat of power in Jerusalem. According to a Talmudic tradition, his father was the brother of the king of Judah. So, his later emergence as a prophet meant his words would at least be heard, if not heeded, in the halls of power.

Isaiah was a front row witness to the deconstruction of Israel, a weakening nation with a series of self-serving leaders in a neighborhood of rising powers, leaving Israel vulnerable, dependent, and increasingly deferential to the stronger nation-states around them. The era highlighted in Isaiah 30 would be when Assyria was the big, alpha dog in the neighborhood, flexing their muscle in ways that were exposing the insecurities and vanity of Jerusalem's power class. Judah's kings, rather than prioritizing the nation's faithfulness to their covenant with the God who had brought them to this land and established them as a people, instead focused

their energies on shifting their alliances in ways they perceived would give them strength to resist or even defeat the mighty Assyria.

And guess what neighbor it was with whom the leaders in Jerusalem were contemplating the formation of an alliance? Egypt! You're kidding, right? The very neighbor who had held them in slavery for 400 years! The neighbor from whom the God of Israel had delivered them. Holy Moses! You do remember what the Lord said to Moses, right? "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians." And that's who you want to return to for help? Have you not learned anything?

So, Isaiah, theologian, prophet, sees all this, and he has a message for Jerusalem's leaders, a message from the Lord. He lays them out! Isaiah 30 begins: "Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt; Therefore the protection of Pharaoh shall become your shame, and the shelter in the

shadow of Egypt your humiliation ... everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them, that brings neither help nor profit, but shame and disgrace.” Somebody’s riled up, and opening up a can of you know what.

Isaiah continues, “Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord.”

Whew! This is clearly evidence of why children, when busted for messing up, immediately say, “Don’t tell mom!” “You’re not going to tell my dad, are you?” This is a spleen venting, I’ve-had-it-up-to-here moment that every parent knows. In your angry frustration you become suddenly and strangely focused, articulate, erudite even. The prophet’s venting goes on for 17 verses!

“For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord.” Oh no, Israel, you’ve just been thrown into a cage match with a rhinoceros! Better not plan on sitting down for a month or two.

But suddenly, the tone changes, the ranting ceases, the temperature is lowered, so much so that some scholars thought this to be an insert from someone else ... but maybe not. Love does not eliminate anger but it certainly can transform it, particularly when you realize the relationship is greater than the offense. Listen to today's text in that light.

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you ... you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”

Do you know what that means? It means everything ... everything. Knowing now the backstory, the context, can you hear, can you feel the full weight of those words? Will you take it to heart? Psalm 136 says, “Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.” The Psalmist then

repeats the phrase 25 times in this one psalm, just in case you didn't catch it the first time. "For his steadfast love endures forever."

The Lord sees the foolhardy, self-defeating, learning deficient path Israel is following, and the Lord reaches that precipice where the next step is: *I'm out! I'm done! I'll send someone for my things later, 'cause I'll not darken the doors of this place ever again!* The Lord reaches that precipice, but then steps back, not because of any repentance on Israel's part, but because of who God is: "Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it.""

When will we learn where our true hope, our clearest path, our unfailing light is found? "When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." The teacher's voice is not intermittent, elusive, or fleeting, it is there ... it is always there. "Your Teacher will not hide himself any more." "For his steadfast love endures forever."

We accumulate bad choices like the pings and points on a pinball machine. Ping, ping ... ping, ping ping. The score ratchets up fast. It's like we're trying to surpass the machine's top score. Congratulations, you've made more bone-headed choices than anyone else today! A lot of important lessons are learned that way, their cost measured in relationships damaged, pain both caused and endured, hardships inflicted on others and ourselves. Yet, so many of those lessons don't have to come with the pain and suffering of experience, if we would just listen to the voice of the teacher behind us. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

"When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"

I recently visited someone in the hospital, a hospital I've been visiting for 37 years, a hospital with a brand new wing, its capacity seemingly having increased a hundredfold. I went to the front desk to get the room number, acting all confident with my ancient, yellowing clergy badge, like I'm in the know. The kindly volunteer looked up the patient, and then

jumped up from the front desk, offering to show me the way, and I brushed her off like, *Hey, don't bother. I've got this. I'm an insider. I've got a badge ...* I got lost. I could have used that voice behind me - *This is the way. Walk in it.*

We tend to ignore those helpful voices behind us, Jesus and scripture topping the list. It's pride, it's arrogant idiocy, it's the illusion of control, it's - *I've got this.* No. You. Don't. And our insistence that we know what we're doing drives God crazy. "Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will." Looking to Egypt for help? Hello! How was that working for you last time? "Everyone comes to shame through a people that cannot profit them."

And yet, what does God do? God steps back; takes a deep breath. "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you." Will we listen? Will we learn? What Emerson said about teachers, Isaiah understood about our Lord: "The great teacher is not the [one] who supplies the most facts, but the one in whose presence we become different people."

"When you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'" Amen.