

“Fools on the Way”
December 16, 2007

James 5:4-11
Isaiah 35:1-10

What do you think is the most foolish thing you've ever done? And when I say, “foolish,” I don't mean silly or frivolous; I mean unwise, thoughtless, irrational. I'm not asking about something that left you embarrassed or something that simply left you with less money or a missed investment opportunity. I'm asking you to go deeper than that. What have you done – or not done – that can still make you shake your head and think that you must have been out of your mind or that can still make you clutch your heart and wonder if you'll ever be and feel forgiven?

Think about it. Is there a “youthful indiscretion” that still haunts you? Is there something more recent, a time in your life when your actions were driven, not by wisdom and compassion, but by fear, despair, or uncontrolled selfishness? Do you have memories, either old or new, of being unkind, greedy, cold, even cruel – to a stranger, a friend, a family member, a pet? Take a moment and think about it.

Now, my beloved friends, if you're one of those churchgoers who are convinced that they lead blameless and upright lives and have never done anything unwise, thoughtless, or foolish, let me ask you two questions. First question: have you never lost your temper with a child, a friend, or a spouse or partner and said things you wish you could take back? *Never?* Second question: on a crowded highway or in a crowded store during the Christmas rush, have you never cut anyone off or refused to cut someone some slack? *Never?*

(Now, if there are some of you here who can truthfully say that you've never done anything unwise, thoughtless, or foolish, I imagine there's a special place in heaven for you, but I think you might get awfully lonely in that special place. I know I won't be there, and neither will my family or my closest friends!)

So, now that we have, I hope, established that few, if any, of us gathered here this morning will qualify for that special, fool-free place in heaven, I want to ask you about one more thing. When you look back at that foolish moment, that thoughtless decision or action, did it seem to alter your relationship with God? How did it feel back then, and how does it feel now? Did you or do you have a sense that what you did or left undone broke your connection to the sacred source of your life? Did you or do you believe that what you did or left undone somehow removed you from the reach of God's love and grace? Have you ever *worried* that it took you outside the bounds of God's love?

If you've ever been afraid that you were no longer one of God's beloved – or if you've felt as though you were never one of God's beloved, to begin with – believe me, you're not alone. I've seen and heard that fear here in this congregation, I've seen and heard it in Alcoholics Anonymous, I've seen and heard it in the news, and I've seen and heard it in myself. It's a fear that can take deep root and grow into something that threatens our sense of being created and blessed by a loving God.

It's also a fear that gripped the people and prophets of ancient Israel more than once, a fear that the prophet Isaiah answers with this morning's description of God's Holy Way, the “highway” on which no traveler, not even a fool, will go astray. To a

people who seem to have lost their way, a people who have reason to wonder if God has abandoned them, Isaiah puts before them (and us) a vision of what God is doing and will do ... and Isaiah urges them and us to place our trust in that vision.

The desert will rejoice and blossom, the burning sand will become a soothing pool of water, and there will be a highway, the Holy Way of God. All those who seek God will travel on this Holy Way, and no one, not even fools, will go astray. To people and *a* people who have done foolish, thoughtless, even incomprehensible things, Isaiah describes God's Holy Way as a path that can hold us and guide us, even when we act the fool with ourselves, with each other, and with God.

Hundreds of years after Isaiah proclaimed this vision of the Holy Way to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, the early Christians experienced *Jesus* as that Holy Way. They experienced Jesus as the Christ, the Way along which people could travel with all their mistakes, all their imperfections, and all their foolishness, without ever straying outside the bounds of God's loving embrace. In Jesus, they saw the power of God at work, reaching out with love and healing to people whom others considered beyond the pale, lost, hopeless, and foolish.

From Jesus, our ancestors in faith heard the words, over and over again, "Follow me," and they heard the parables and stories in which Jesus revealed the extravagance of God's welcome and the abundance of God's forgiveness. They heard, they saw, and they experienced that welcome and that forgiveness *through* Jesus. They came to know Jesus as the Holy Way Isaiah had described long before, the Way from which no traveler, not even a fool, will go astray.

Through our brothers and sisters in the past, through the scripture they bequeathed to us, and through the living Christ here in our midst, God invites us to join Jesus on that Holy Way. God invites us to travel the highway that can claim us and guide us back from our greatest foolishness ... the highway on which we will come to know, in the words of the apostle Paul, that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ."

This is the Christ, the Holy Way, whose birth we await yet again this Advent. This is the Holy Way that God seeks to renew in our lives and our world. This is the Holy Way that God, in each Advent and Christmas season, asks us to choose, to accept, to continue to travel. This is the Holy Way that we are *invited* to travel, knowing that we'll never be able to travel it perfectly and trusting that God's love and grace are more powerful than any foolishness of ours.

I'm not saying that our foolishness doesn't matter. Rapidly melting ice caps, seemingly endless wars, oil-soaked birds and beaches, and an unwillingness to see the beauty of God in people who are labeled "stranger," "foreigner," or "alien" – I find nothing in here [the Bible], here [my heart], or here [my head] that tells me these things don't matter. What I do find – in Isaiah, in the Christmas stories, and elsewhere – is the promise that God is always at work, forging that Holy Way and inviting fools like you and me to place our lives in its care. I find and I hear God's promise that none of our human foolishness will have the last word. I hear the reassurance that God's compassion and mercy – and not our mistakes, our limitations, or our foolishness – are at the heart of the cosmos.

And at the heart of *Christianity* is the astounding – you might even say “foolish” – claim that the power of God comes to earth, to human life, in the form of a vulnerable infant. For Christians, the power and promise of the Holy Way come in tangible, human form – in a child born in the most unlikely place to the most unlikely people. The Holy Way issues its invitation through the cries of a newborn, a child whom the powers of the world are more likely to ignore than to recognize as the presence and present of the God who seeks to bless and guide all of creation. The Holy Way becomes visible through a child, the child who grows into the adult who is still saying, “Follow me.”

“Follow me.” Jesus issues his invitation to follow the Holy Way without great fanfare, without great threats, and without a promise that our travels along the Way will always be easy. But what Jesus *does* offer with his invitation are the promises that God’s grace is abundant beyond all measure and that none of our foolishness can ever disqualify us from God’s welcome – just ask the Prodigal Son.

We are invited to say, “Yes,” once again to the Holy Way in this Advent Season. We are invited to travel on a path that will hold and guide us in a grace so abundant that it can overcome our mistakes, our thoughtlessness, and our foolishness. We are invited to travel on the Holy Way by a God who comes, not with the power of coercion, but with the trusting, vulnerable love of a child in a manger. We can put our feet and our very selves on that Holy Way, or we can be like “the unclean” in Isaiah’s prophecy and simply pass it by.

The choice is ours to make. The God of compassion and mercy longs for us to choose the Holy Way, so that God can welcome us with joy and thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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