

Year B Advent 1
Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37
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Last Sunday a friend of mine participated in a grief workshop that took place after the main service at her Episcopal church in the Northeast. She had not expected more than a handful of people, but over 200 people showed up, all of whom had experienced some kind of loss in their lives. The Covid pandemic has been replaced by a pandemic of depression, grief, and even despair. People are trying to return to life as usual, but the world has changed, and we have changed. Whatever coping mechanisms were in place before the pandemic are either no longer being utilized by those who are struggling, or have become insufficient to respond to the depth and sheer volume of loss.

When life is disrupted, or in some cases derailed, by loss of any kind- a loved one, our health, a job, a relationship, or any kind of loss or significant change in life, being restored to a fulfilling life can be extremely difficult. Once the darkness gets its teeth into us it can be very hard to shake it. Because grief or loss is cumulative, piling on top of other losses we have experienced, the next significant change can feel like the straw that broke the camel's back. Too much change for the worse can be more than we can handle all at once and can cause us to derail if our sense of well being is dependent on favorable circumstances, or our sense of self is dependent on our own performance rather than who we are in relationship to God. It is only the

unchanging, all powerful, presence of the living God, and His life-giving Spirit within that gives us the resilience we need in the face of overwhelming loss and hardship. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) It is the light from within that comes from the Spirit of Christ, who fills us with the light and love of God, that has power to free us from the grip of darkness and hold us in that place of light and life.

My friend had been asked to serve as a table leader in this grief workshop because she was all too familiar with loss. She had lost a teenage son years before, in a tragic car accident. He was a passenger in the back seat of a car being driven by another teenager coming home one evening, when the car went off an icy mountain road into a river. He had been the only one who had not made it out alive. It's a grief she will never fully recover from. Losing a child is not something a person can just put behind them. It is a loss and a grief that never really goes away. But it is possible to live a happy and full life again- to laugh and love and be filled with joy again even though that loss is still carried in your heart.

My friend grew up in the Episcopal Church in a family that was very committed to their faith, so church every Sunday was part of their routine. Her father was the lawyer for the diocese of New York and her parents were friends with the bishop who

baptized both of their children. That routine of regular attendance at worship every Sunday was a lifeline for her in the wake of her son's death. Her faith was a source of strength for her. Friends who saw how she was coping asked her to go speak to others who had lost loved ones, especially those who had lost children, and she found that reaching out and ministering to others in their grief helped her with her own grief. She also was intentional about doing things to take care of herself. That acronym for Joy that I mentioned recently- Jesus, others, then yourself- was certainly true of her experience.

She had experienced other losses as well. Her husband in her first marriage was an alcoholic. They had separated two years before her son died and divorced a year after his death. Her second husband also struggled with alcohol until he found healing through a rehab program and the ministry of AA leading to a renewal in their own relationship. Much later she wrestled with a disappointment in her career after a long, faithful, and successful run.

Even when we think we have moved on from a past loss, it impacts the effect of the next one on us. But when we navigate these griefs by seeking help and growing deeper in our faith, we can also find our coping mechanisms strengthened and our resilience increased when we are anchored deep in our relationship with the Lord. This was the experience of my friend. She found strength through Alanon and through going deeper in her faith. Through weekly Bible Study, a retreat that she and her second husband attended growing in their faith together, and being very involved in her church, she developed a deepening personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a greater understanding of God's Word. Now she remains committed to attending

Church and Bible Study weekly to sustain and strengthen her faith-taking care of herself- in the midst of the ongoing challenges of life.

None of us are strangers to loss. The older we get the more losses we tend to experience, so we must have that deepening relationship with the Lord to balance that growing list of losses. This is what gave my friend the strength and the wisdom to live a happy, full life herself, and to be a source of encouragement for others who are struggling with so many different forms of grief. In the table discussion at the workshop held at her church, at first no one was willing to share what grief they had suffered. They preferred to suffer silently than admit to any weakness or personal struggle. It wasn't until she told her story with an openness and honesty that invited vulnerability, that others began to talk about what they had been through. Somehow opening up about our grief and being willing to share it with others makes the burden somewhat lighter, especially when they realize we aren't alone in our struggle.

Our reading from Isaiah 64 is in the form of a prayer. The prophet is expressing the grief of the people who have been exiled from their homeland and long to go back home. They have lost their home, their identity as a people of God, friends and loved ones, their jobs. Everything about life as they knew it was lost when they went into exile in Babylon after their city was destroyed, other than their own life itself. They felt as though God had gone silent. They couldn't feel God's presence or see any sign of it in their current circumstances, and they were struggling against the darkness. Isaiah begins his prayer with affirming the truth of who God is, and what God has done in the past to intercede for

His people. He is as much reminding himself as he is reminding his people about God's steadfast love and faithfulness. God is unchanging, so the character of God, God's love, faithfulness and desire to intercede on behalf of His people has not changed, in spite of their feeling abandoned. When we are being overwhelmed by feelings of discouragement and despair, we need to remind ourselves of what we know to be true even if our feelings and circumstances don't affirm it at the time. Feelings are not to be trusted. Faith is when we hold to the truth in spite of what we might feel or experience. That is what keeps us from being tossed about by the wind and waves of life's storms.

Isaiah calls on God to act- to intercede on behalf of His people as God has done in the past. He acknowledges the sin and unworthiness of the people whose hearts had grown far from God before they experienced this devastation. Even as they pray for God's presence, they recognize their sin would make them unworthy and unable to stand in the presence of God. It is not God's unfaithfulness but their own unfaithfulness, their sinfulness that has caused God to seem far away. They have become like dry leaves, drained of life by living separated from God and blown away by the wind. Even their righteous deeds are like filthy rags compared to God's righteousness. The rags spoken of are blood-soaked rags- a symbol of separation from God and of life poured out in waste.

Isaiah prays that God would intercede for the sake of God's name- so that all would know the power and mercy of God. He prays for mercy not because we deserve it but because of our relationship with God. It is because of God's love for us, because we are God's people who have been created by God for His purposes, that we call upon God

to intercede and save us. It is because the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and His mercies never come to an end that we can trust God will act according to God's character. This is what Isaiah is trusting in as he calls on God to look upon His people with favor and act on their behalf once again.

God has acted on our behalf. He has not left us in exile but has sent His only Son to come and live among us, to teach us about the steadfast love of the Lord, to demonstrate His power that makes us whole as only the giver of life can, and to free us from the hold of sin and death through His death on the cross and resurrection to eternal life. Because of Jesus, the darkness has no hold on us. When we are filled with the light of Christ it breaks away the darkness that would cling to us. While we may in and of ourselves be powerless over the darkness, Christ has already won that victory. Only in a relationship with him can we have that victory realized in our own lives. He can overcome what we cannot. He strengthens and restores us through being fed by the study of God's Word, through His Holy Spirit within, and through fellowship with and ministry to others. This is how we take care of ourselves even as we love and care for others in his name. This is how we find our way back to healing and wholeness as we live through change and loss without being overcome by them. This is how we experience light and life in the darkness.

Let us pray,
"Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. **Amen.**"