

Cellmates

November 30, 2004

Few know blindness so profoundly as prisoners who once could see the whole world but now find the universe shrunk to the size of a cell. Inmates hear only what jailers allow, most often some version of "We own you." As for music, the rhythm of one's own pulse must suffice, and that hardly leads to dancing. One can even forget how to walk.

Such was John's plight now that Herod had locked him up so as to silence the cranky prophet's tongue. As the days dragged on, perhaps John could see only that he would never escape the bars unless he got really skinny. But even then, he could never squeeze his head through, so he'd have to leave that behind.

Despite the isolation, rumors from outside reached John. The Coming One he'd baptized and boldly proclaimed had begun to make his move. Soon would come the smiting of evildoers. Judgment on the threshing floor would surely commence. But the news that filtered into prison didn't have the sound John expected. Jesus was saying things like, "See, I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves. . . . They will hand you over to councils. . . and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next. . . . Do not fear those who kill the body. . . . Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father" (Matt. 10:16-31, *passim*).

And yet, the sparrows do fall. John would soon be among them. Had John baptized the *Messiah* for this? Would this Jesus prove his preaching wrong?

The prison of disillusionment that held John has its cell blocks all over our territory. A dear colleague lies dying in the year he would have retired. His mind has more books queued up and ready to write. His heart remains strong and spirit-filled. But cancer, that patient jailer, has made his world tiny. Tubes bind his wasted frame. Morphine has begun to string cobwebs through his brain. The only rumor that enters his cell says there are no more towns to which he might flee.

So, Jesus, in whom my friend has trusted, are you the one, or do we look for another?

Jesus sends word back to John that seeing, hearing, walking and rising from the dead have been breaking out all over. Hopefully, when he receives Jesus' report, John will remember Isaiah's prophecies about the marvels that light up the wilderness. They will clue John to the truth about the day that's dawned on his prison cell.

But not completely, not unless John could somehow know as we do the other stop Jesus made in the wilderness after receiving John's baptism. There Jesus faced huge questions concerning what kind of messiah he would become. Should he—and how should he—open the prisons where the hungry starve, where tyrants rule the nations of the world, where disease and accidents knock the young from their temple perches to the rocks below?

When Jesus left the wilderness for the towns of Galilee and Judea, the stones remained inedible, Herod still reigned, and sudden death still stalked the land. Not that somebody wouldn't have hell to pay for all this nastiness that makes life cheap. But the one to pay it would be Jesus himself. He would go the way of the cross. The road to Jerusalem would prove his Holy Way, a road quite busy with traffic of the unclean and lost fools gone astray. He would go as a sheep among the wolves, straight into prison. There he would die, just as John had done before him.

Yes, John had prepared the way Jesus would traverse, though not in the manner the Baptizer may have thought. John had given the executioners and word-of-God silencers one more round of practice by which to perfect their skills. While he, like the rest of us, looked for a holy way out of prison, the Coming One reversed the dream. His way led into prison and into the wilderness.

Now our way out is his way in, or so Matthew's Gospel would teach us. When the one for whom John had paved the way told his own followers where his way led and called them to follow, he told them to go straight to hell. "They can't keep you out," he promised (Matt. 16:18). He bade them, moreover, to carry with them the means of their own execution.

The Holy Way of Advent that cross-toting fools tread leads not out of the wilderness but ever deeper into it. None of us will escape the wilderness anyway. Our whole life happens within its wordless void, on its arid slopes that drain the life from us as we wander in circles learning the same old lessons over and over.

Precisely that dry land shall blossom, however. It will rejoice with singing. Isaiah promised it. I have seen and heard the fulfillment. In the cell where my colleague

lies with his dried-up tongue thick with morphine, we break the silence with singing. Indeed, it now seems that all the worship we ever did together, and all the theology we ever taught to our students and to each other, were only practice for this last leg of the wilderness journey.

Yes, I'll tell John what I've seen and heard. The crippled dance boldly enough to make all their tubes jiggle. The dumb cry out in whispers of tearful thanks. As sorrow and sighing come and go, the broken-down rejoice at the Good News come to stay. But this can happen for John only if I go to his cell and remain there, ready to die with him, ready to join him in singing his head off.