



***“Peaks and Valleys”***

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Isaiah 40: 1–11***

Isaiah’s prophetic proclamation signals the clarion call for me that Christmas is just around the corner. I am not alone in that perception, thanks to the work of George F. Handel, who included several of Isaiah’s passages in Part I of his *Messiah* libretto.

Isaiah 40 and Handel’s *Messiah* have had tremendous staying power in Western culture. I think this is because the words of the prophet and the lyrics in the libretto draw from the heights and depths of Ancient Israel’s life story, and speak tenderly and profoundly across many cultures and centuries about the peaks and valleys of human experience.

The truth of our lives as individuals and as a species is that our experience is punctuated by peaks and valleys, and that each of these peaks and valleys has a spiritual component.

Passages like Isaiah 40 call to mind the deep suffering experienced by the Ancient Israelites, who were exiled in Babylon for more than 40 years.

Though I do not believe this, there were many in Israel—then and now—who believed that the Babylonia exile was God’s punishment for Israel’s infidelity. (Think valley, deep valley.)

Harsh as exile was, Isaiah explained, punishment was not the last word. The Exile was over. A liberator was coming. It was time to go home. God would show them the way. And God did. God sent a liberator named Cyrus of Persia, who released the Exiles from bondage. And God led them home to Jerusalem. (Think peak, high peak.)

Peaks and valleys.

II

The seasons of Advent and Christmas seem to cast a bright light on our individual and corporate lives, and remind us of just how craggy our spiritual topography can be. Like the lives of the Ancient Israelites, our lives are marked by peaks and values.

This past week, for example, the world paused on December 1 to observe the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first reported AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) cases to the CDC (Center for Disease Control).<sup>1</sup>

For some of us, the 30<sup>th</sup> observance of World AIDS Day was a faint bleep on the international calendar. But for others, especially those who have lived with HIV/AIDS, or lived with and loved people with HIV/AIDS, December 1 was a very poignant day—a day to remember that our life histories have been punctuated by peaks and valleys, and that there may yet be more mountains to climb, and valleys to descend with regard to our relationship with this disease.

For me, the 30<sup>th</sup> observance of World AIDS Day was an occasion to remember, to grieve, to celebrate, and to recommit to the struggle.

I met the human face of AIDS twenty-four years ago, while participating in a Clinical Pastoral Education program at University Hospital in downtown Boston. I was between my middler and senior year in seminary.

Dr. Larry Burton, who was then Vice President of Religion and Health at University Hospital, taught my colleagues and me about the facts of HIV/AIDS, so that we could separate fact from fiction, and have a basis for ministering with patients, families, and health care professionals, who were as challenged by the moral and spiritual aspects of the disease as they were the physical aspects of AIDS.

Learning about HIV/AIDS at University Hospital in those days challenged me to explore more deeply my own internalized homophobia and the judgments I had formed about IV drug users. It was also an occasion to see how much the fear of contagion and how much havoc homophobia could wreak on otherwise highly competent health care professionals.

Ministering with People With AIDS (which was and is all of us) wasn't easy, especially in those days, when we needed a cure for two diseases: one that we called AIDS, and the other that some of us dubbed "AFRAIDS," which was the fear of HIV/AIDS.

Despite the challenges that these experiences presented, I was (and am) grateful for that CPE experience, and for the opportunity to develop a platform for understanding the medical and pastoral aspects of AIDS. Because, just a year later, I was called to ministry at a church fairly traditional (for the UCC) down church in Boston, which was located just one mile from Bay Village, which was ground-zero for AIDS in those days.

Like Father Mulcahy, the chaplain on the TV series M\*A\*S\*H,<sup>2</sup> who ministered to a mythic medical unit in the middle of the Korean War, I tried to offer solace to doctors and nurses and patients and loved ones who were living in the middle of the War on AIDS.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/30thanniversary/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M\\*A\\*S\\*H\\_\(TV\\_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M*A*S*H_(TV_series))

Within a matter of months, people were finding their way from the streets and the pews to my office, seeking support and counsel about AIDS-related concerns. Some were sick. Some were caring for loved ones who were ill. Some others were working in health care fields and burning out from battle fatigue. Still others were trying to decide whether to get tested or not, and if so, what to do about the consequences of test results in an era when a positive diagnosis was the equivalent of a death sentence.

One person, in particular, made a significant impact on me, and the AIDS ministry of Old South Church in those days. His name was Brad Truesdale. Brad came to meet with me a few weeks after he started attending Old South. He told me that he had AIDS and that he was involved in an experimental treatment program. (Everything was experimental back in those days.)

Brad told me that living with AIDS had forced him to pay more attention to his spiritual life, and that he felt compelled to look for a church home. I asked him how we could help. He said, "You know Arlene, I have a lot of doctors and nurses in my life. I also have a pharmacist, a social worker, and a psychotherapist. [Brad was a successful business executive, and had great health benefits and other resources to provide for his care.] What I don't have, Brad said, is someone to pray with. I am hoping that you and others at this church will pray with me."

After a few more conversations like that one with Brad, I went to the Board of Ministers and Deacons and the Church Council, and asked for their support to launch an AIDS Prayer Group. Our leaders didn't blink. They were immediately supportive. I announced the start-up of this new group in the church bulletin and newsletter. People came out of the woodwork to talk with me, and attend the prayer group.

Most of the prayer group participants were gay men, but they were far more closeted about their disease or association with Persons With AIDS than they were about their sexual orientation. Given participants' fears, I started the AIDS Prayer Group in the living room of my apartment. Eventually, prayer group participants became more courageous, and they wanted to move the meetings to the church. I supported that move.

We met once a month for an hour or less in my office. Our liturgy was simple. We welcomed each other, formed a circle, and created a simple worship center on my coffee table. Our worship center included a blue pillar candle, which was a symbol of hope and healing for PWAs, a daily devotional for PWAs, and roll of rainbow ribbon and some safety pins.

Each session began with me lighting the blue candle, and saying something like this:

Welcome to the circle. My name is Arlene. I am one of the pastors here at Old South Church. We are a church with AIDS. We are also a church with and for people with AIDS. You're welcome here. Feel free to share what's going on with you today, this week, or this month. If you prefer to pass, that's OK too. Who would like to be next?

Sometimes people talked about what was happening with their physical health, but mostly, in keeping with Brad's request, participants shared what was happening in their spiritual lives.

By the end of the hour, each person present was given a chance to talk. After the last person spoke, we held hands—which was crucial because so many were afraid to touch people with AIDS for fear of getting sick. We held hands, and I gathered up the joys and concerns of the group in a pastoral prayer. Before participants left the gathering, anyone new received a daily meditation book and a rainbow ribbon. We hugged. We made sure that everyone had rides to appointments, food on the table, and someone checking on them. We took care of each other.

Four other AIDS ministries grew out of this prayer group at Old South. A few of us became involved in Boston's Interfaith AIDS Ministry, by responding to the physical needs of PWAs.

Old South took a leading role in the Ecumenical AIDS Healing Services that emerged around the city at that time. We were one of the first 12 congregations to host monthly AIDS healing services.

Our professional choir performed a free performance of John Rutter's *Requiem*, and our church organized a city-wide conference that brought together healthcare workers, social service organizations, faith leaders, and PWAs, based on the theme, "By the Waters of Babylon," from Psalm 137.

One of the other pastors on the staff, Marc Walker, and I fielded phone calls from J. S. Waterman's and Sons, a downtown mortuary that was inundated by requests for arrangements for PWAs. A man in our congregation was a vice president of the mortuary, and he knew that we were among the only churches and preachers, who would perform funerals for people who weren't members of our congregation, especially people with AIDS. I'll never forget the memorial that I led at J.S. Waterman's, for a young man from Boston, whose friend from Buffalo drove all day to get to the service, and got up and spoke and said, "This is my 47<sup>th</sup> friend who has died of AIDS."

It was a low time for those of us as Ground Zero in Boston. It was a valley time, a Death Valley time.

When Stephanie and I left Boston for New York in 1992, I was convinced that I would never again see the people at Old South who were living with AIDS—at least not this side of heaven. But thankfully, I was wrong.

A couple of years ago, Old South Church invited us back to Boston to celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church becoming Open and Affirming. That weekend, I learned that the AIDS Prayer Group, which we had founded in the late 1980s was still going, but that because medicines and therapies had improved so much, AIDS had become more of a chronic disease rather than a death notice for most people whom I had left behind, and that—praise God—several of the people whom I had said goodbye to in 1992, were in worship that Sunday to welcome Stephanie and me back to The Old South Church.

That was definitely a peak experience for me, and for both of us. The valley had been lifted up. Some of the rough places had been smoothed. It was like going home. It was like heaven here on earth. It was like Jerusalem restored—just like Isaiah had promised.

### III

Now, that's a snapshot of some of the peaks and valleys in my spiritual mountain range. I wonder what the topography of your life looks like and what stories you would tell about the high and low moments of your journey.

Think about your own life for a moment. Imagine your spiritual journey as a mountain range. How would you depict it? Would you draw rolling hills like the hills between Hayward and the Livermore Valley, or would you sketch spikier topography that looked more like the Rocky Mountains, the Swiss Alps, or the Nepalese Himalayas?

Think about your life. Take time to sketch your spiritual mountain range today or some other time later this week, and give yourself the gift of reflection, and remembrance. Ask yourself, "Where was God, or perhaps more appropriately, who was God for you—on your trek through the highs and lows of life so far?" What do you remember? What do you need to grieve? What do you need to celebrate? What from these experiences have you learned? What do you want to take with you as you move ahead? What do you need to let go of and leave behind?

When you've given yourself time to sketch, reflect, and respond to these questions, blow the dust off of your Bible, and reread today's OT lesson, or listen to the tenor aria from Handel's *Messiah* and remind yourself of these facts: the God of Advent, the God whom we worship in this season, is the God of the High Mountains, and the Deep Valleys, and every elevation in between.

There never has been, and there never will be, a time when we ever have to, or ever will travel alone. No matter how deep the valleys, and how distant the hope, God's got travel plans made for us, and will guide us like the gentle shepherd whom Isaiah envisioned in chapter 40. This was God's promise to the Exiles. It is God's promise to every generation, including our own. Thanks be to God. Amen.