

*Have We Lost Our Way,
Or Is This Just The Way We Are?*

Rev. Tom VandeStadt
Congregational Church of Austin, UCC
December 1, 2019
First Sunday in Advent: Hope

I still can't remember when or how I lost my way.
Neil Young

“I still can't remember when or how I lost my way.”

That's one of my all-time favorite song lyrics, by Neil Young.

“I still can't remember when or how I lost my way.”

Anyone know the song? “Cortez the Killer,” from the album, *Yuma*.

It's one of my favorite lyrics because it's part of the soundtrack of my life. I lost my way. I can't remember when, or how, but I lost my way. For years, I was obsessed with the notion that I'd lost my way.

There was a path through life I was supposed to walk, but I wasn't on it. I was on the wrong path, and the wrong path had brought me to the wrong place in life.

There was a person I was supposed to be, but I wasn't him. I was someone I wasn't supposed to be, the wrong person. What happened to the person I was supposed to be? I lost him somewhere along the way.

But when, how?

These were real obsessions of mine at one point in my life.

Talk about exile. Exile from yourself.

Living as someone you're not supposed to be, but not knowing who you're supposed to be. Convinced you're living a lie, but not knowing the truth about yourself, your true identity.

It's terribly confusing. I guess that's a trait of being lost—being confused. To be in exile from yourself is to be confused about yourself. And it can be quite agonizing to be confused about yourself.

For what does one hope when one is in exile from one's self?

One hopes for the exile to end.

To no longer be confused, lost.

To know the truth about one's self, and to live one's life truthfully.

To find one's self, one's way.

To come home to one's self. To be at home with one's self.

At least for me, when I was in exile from myself, that's what I hoped for.

By the way, if you want to watch a brilliant drama about people who're living in exile from themselves, watch the series, *The Crown*, especially season three. The series does a wonderful job raising existential questions and portraying personal struggles over identity. Each member of the royal family is portrayed living in lonely exile from their authentic self because of the public role they're compelled to play. And each member suffers in agony because of the life they have to live, and the life that goes un-lived.

“I still can’t remember when or how I lost my way.”

I’ve met with several people recently who’ve shared with me their concern that we as a species are doomed. They didn’t use the word doomed. I’m cleaning up their language. But the intensity of their language reflected the intensity of their feelings. Climate derangement and ecosystem collapse, cascading political and economic crises, overwhelming stress and anxiety—we’re doomed.

I can’t help but ask, have we as a species lost our way?

Are we as a species on the wrong path? Are we supposed to be on a different path, one that we somehow, at some point, veered off?

Are we humans supposed to be different than we are?

Living in different ways than the ways we live?

Acting in different ways than the ways we act?

Behaving in different ways?

Relating to one another and the earth in different ways?

Organizing our collective life in different ways?

Relating to who or what is transcendent, sacred, holy, divine in different ways?

Are we humans in exile from the species we’re supposed to be?

Have we lost our way?

Or is this just the way we are?

Maybe this is just the way we are.

Look around—maybe the human behavior you see around the world, in all of its varied beneficent and harmful expressions, is pretty much what you’d expect from humans, given all the varied traits and capacities evolution has bestowed upon us human animals. Maybe we humans are behaving on earth just the way we humans evolved to behave. This is just the way we are.

I’m fascinated by the question—have we as a species lost our way, or is this just the way we are?

I think there are many of us, and many around the world, who sense in our gut, who feel in our heart, who think with our intellect, who know with our mind, that something is wrong.

Something is off, *really off*, with us humans.

Something is wrong with some of the ways we humans are behaving towards the earth, other species, other people. With some of the ways we humans are living our lives.

We look around the earth, we look at what’s happening, at how humans are behaving towards the earth, other species, one another, and our hearts feel, our minds know, something is wrong.

And using our human capacity for creative imagery and metaphor, we express our thoughts and feelings that something is wrong by saying, we’re on the wrong path, we’ve lost our way. We’re not where we’re supposed to be, or who we’re supposed to be. We’re in exile.

Exile is our image, our metaphor, for something is wrong, something is off, *really off*, with us humans.

Advent begins in exile.

With our hearts feeling, and our minds knowing, something is wrong with what we’re doing, how we’re doing it, where we’ve ended up, and who we’ve become.

Something is wrong with how we’re making our home here on earth.

We're not at home here on earth.
We're in exile.

Advent begins in exile.
A time of feeling out-of-sorts, disconnected, out-of-place.
Not right, not whole.
Not at home.
I'm not who I should be, or could be, or aspire to be.
I'm not where I should be, or could be, or aspire to be.
And I don't know who I should be, or where I should be. Or could be, or aspire to be.
I'm lost. Confused.
Not at home with myself, or others, or God.

Advent begins in exile.
As a light shining in the darkness. Hope.
Hope, for exile to end.
Hope, for homecoming.
For coming home to oneself, for being at home with one's self.
Being at home with others.
Being at home with the earth.
Being at home with God.
In our tradition, we call that Holy Communion—holy union with God, others, the earth.
Advent begins in exile.
As hope for exile to end.
As hope for Holy Communion.
So it's appropriate that we participate together in our tradition's ritual of Holy
Communion on this first Sunday of Advent, this Sunday in which we hope for the experience of
deep and pervasive holy union with God, others, and the earth.
For ourselves, and for all humans on this earth.
Holy Communion. The ultimate homecoming.
Our deepest, most pervasive hope.