“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

I think it is fair to say that we are doing a lot of talking in the dark these days. We are talking in the dark about what is happening on the streets in response to the two recent decisions of grand juries not to indict police officers, decisions that have ignited the deep seated fear and distrust that exists on every side of this nation’s intractable racial and class divides. Likewise we are talking in the dark about millions of illegal immigrants--knowing not a one, save maybe the one paid in cash who cleans our house. We are talking in the dark about the Middle East, about Muslims, about ISIS, about terrorists. Two years after Newtown and thousands of deaths by guns later, we are still talking in the dark about gun violence and the meaning of the second amendment and the content of “freedom.” Closer to home, we are talking in the dark around the kitchen table to aging parents, to homebound young adults, to unresponsive spouses, to misguided friends. We are really good at talking in the dark. Listening in the dark? Not so good.

The words of Second Isaiah and Mark are words first addressed to people who dwelt in political, social and spiritual darkness. Whether waiting in the lonely exile of Babylon during the last half of the sixth century or soon to be fleeing Jerusalem in the wake of the destruction of the temple sometime around 70 A.D., the people who first listened to the words of Isaiah and Mark were people who, if they listened at all, listened in the dark.

To be a bit more specific, after 150 years of exile in Babylon, the reigning religious assumption among Isaiah’s readers was that God had abandoned them. Two generations after their deportation, the silence of God had become deafening. Moreover, despite every effort to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land early on, now even the weeping of God’s people had fallen
silent. As one interpreter of Isaiah’s words put it, “Disasters make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure.” In due time, the worship of local gods and the lure of the good life in Babylon began to divide the exiles religiously, socially and economically, leading many to quit listening in the dark for God to break God’s silence.

Almost 600 years later in Jerusalem, Rome was about to laid siege to the city, cutting it off from the outside world in every way, ringing the city walls with thousands of crucified Jews. A confusion of voices erupted in the darkness. The word of the Lord, according to some, counseled resistance; for others, many of them followers of a rabbi from Nazareth, submission was the way that would lead to peace and security. In the end, ‘the Romans would take the Temple, kill its last defenders, loot its treasury, and set it afire.’ The dwelling place of God on earth would lay in ruins. As it was in Babylon, so it was about to be again in Jerusalem, the experience of God was an experience of absence. God was nowhere to be found in the darkness.

Listen for God’s word, we say every Sunday before we read the words of Scripture. So I say to you again, listen in the words of Second Isaiah and Mark for a word of the Lord in the dark, spoken to counter the silence, the hopelessness, the helplessness of God’s people. Isaiah writes, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” Old Testament words are never idle: once uttered, the word is accomplished. Mark declares simply, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”: the good news that, in the end, would redeem the deaths of thousands on crosses ringing the city. As you listen to the words of these texts, hold in your head the desolation and destruction, the despair and disillusionment and death of Jews in Babylon and in Jerusalem; but
also hold in your heart the hopelessness and helplessness of countless millions around the globe and down the Avenue or even around your kitchen table in this Advent season. The words truly break God’s silence to announce the end of God’s absence, the presence of God’s shepherd, the coming of God’s Son. Amid all of the other promising words vying to be heard by a people in extremis, how in the world is God’s word—so long missed or dismissed or derided—to be heard in this present darkness?

Taking his cue from Isaiah, Mark follows his announcement of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with news of another, who will prepare defeated resistance fighters and pacifists to listen in the dark for God’s word entering in, just as the voice in Isaiah readied lonely exiles. Both Isaiah and Mark speak of a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing a way for God in the desert of human lives, in the desert of our common life. What strikes me is that both are saying there is nothing for us to do in the dark now but listen. God is the doer, the initiator, the preparer, sending someone to us who will clear out what is in the way of our being able to listen, what is keeping us from this relationship for which we were made. In Isaiah, that someone is told to “Cry” and asks, “Cry what?” God’s response is stunning. Basically God says, “Tell them they are mortal. Tell them they are going to die. Tell them they will be forgotten forever upon the earth.” In Mark, it is a voice that says more, that says “Come and die. Die in the waters of baptism to the life you are leading without God. Then be born again out of those waters; emerge naked and dependent upon him who is coming to give you a whole new life, a life animated by God’s Spirit.”

If John the Baptizer is any clue, likely the person sent by God into our present darkness--with word that we will die and must die--is someone to whom we are not likely to listen. In the first place, Mark tells us that John was a sight: clothed in camel’s hair, locusts in his mouth,
honey running down his chin. But in the second place and in the darkness, listening rather than seeing is all we can go on. Still, the word John says is precisely the word we mean to silence by all our talking, the reality we mean to keep offstage by all the noise and activity designed to lead us away from the manger of poverty and rejection, of vulnerability and death, and into the happy holiday ahead. The death that was exile in Babylon and soon to be the crucified bodies ringing the walls of Jerusalem, the death that is now claiming thousands on the wrong side of a gun, on the wrong side of religion, on the wrong side of the world economically or medically or politically: these are the things that ruin Christmas, we say. But in response to our running, at the mouth, a voice says “Turn around, clear around, and look death in the face if God’s word is the word you are waiting to hear in the dark.”

What happened, you wonder, to that good news with which these two texts began? Where is the comfort in words that only deepen the darkness? Where is the hope in a voice telling us we will die or we must die in order to live? This is inconceivably bad news unless God himself is on the way to us with might and power; unless God should enter this present darkness as a warrior strong enough to defeat the reign of death in Babylon and Jerusalem, in Ferguson and Cleveland, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, in Kobani and Kabul, in Chestnut Hill and Blue Bell. Yet our expectations of God, unchanged in all of human history, is that God will send a savior who will get our side victory—a sure sign we have not yet listened, that we are still talking in the dark.

Try again, God says to the one preparing our ears to listen. Get up to a high mountain and lift up your voice. Say that the arm with which God rules (are you listening, really listening?) is the arm of a shepherd carrying lambs in his bosom. The might with which God reigns (listen to this!) is like the gentle leading of a mother sheep. The images tutor our listening ears, though I think even the Baptist may have been a bit misleading, telling those still dripping with water
from the Jordan (telling those who will soon be dripping with the blood of crucified martyrs) that one was coming who was more powerful than he was.

“In those days,” Mark continues, “Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee.” A nobody from nowhere. Just like them, he stripped naked and entered the waters of baptism, submitted himself to the waters of death in the beginning, even as, in the end, he was stripped naked, nailed to a cross like all the others, and entered the tomb, accompanying us like a shepherd through the valley of the shadow of death, joining us in the darkness that only his light, his voice, his word, his love can defeat. I think it not by chance in Mark that only Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the dove descending at his baptism; only Jesus hears the voice from heaven in the dark world he has entered, saying “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased”: only Jesus is listening in the dark to God.

What if, out there in the winter world, there were a voice sent to you by God, maybe precisely the voice you would dismiss in the light of day, that will arrest your attention just long enough to make you forget what you were going to say, will silence the cacophony of voices now sounding in your head. Who am I to tell you this, but do as I say, not as I do: stop using your words; turn around in your tracks; inhabit and do not deny the darkness. Then listen, simply listen for the coming again of the Mighty One who entered the darkness and put on insecurity from Mary’s womb; for the provisioner who, assuming our hunger and thirst, feeds us love at his table; for the shepherd who gathers us in his arms and finally, when the death comes for us--our warfare over, our iniquity pardoned--will carry us, like wordless children lost in wonder, home.