

Isaiah 40: 1-11
Psalm 85
Mark 1: 1-8

Preparation
December 7, 2014
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“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Or, as you may have heard it sung, “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.” Who can hear the words of the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah without hearing music in their heads? George Friedrich Handel set those phrases to beautiful notes, and it’s imprinted for some of us. Isaiah hears God say, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,” or as King James and Handel say it, “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem.” This begins what is sometimes called Isaiah’s Book of Consolation, offering a vision of a world and a time where suffering has ended and God is revealed as a power so great that it can only be expressed as tenderness.

It is a beautiful poem, and is quoted by each of the Gospel writers when they tell the story of John the Baptist’s preaching. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” And so we read these passages in Advent, our season of preparation.

Of course, you have all been preparing already. Your days may already feel too full, with the Christmas card lists, and the Christmas parties and the concerts for attending and performing. Not to mention the travel plans and the presents to be bought and the Christmas dinner to be cooked. Our to-do lists for preparing for Christmas are already quite full. Do we really have time to prepare one more thing...let alone a major construction project like a highway for our God?

Advent is counter-intuitive. Advent tells us to stop, if only for an hour on a Sunday morning. Stop, and breathe, and listen. Before you start doing something, you stop whatever else you were doing. Before we can begin to hear the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, as Mark says it, we have to listen. Before you can fill yourself with good tidings, something in us has to empty and make room.

Of course, these words of Scripture were not written in comfortable, contemplative, peaceful times. They were written when the world was falling apart, when all the old rules seemed not to fit. Isaiah’s first listeners had spent two generations in captivity in a distant land, and did not actually know Jerusalem as a home. In a way, they were being consoled with a promise of the unknown...once again, counter-intuitive. Don’t we usually console by saying that everything will be all right and go back to “normal?” Isaiah and John the Baptist comfort and challenge us by describing the “new normal.”

Much as I love the ancient words of Isaiah and the bracing presence of John the Baptist, it is time for us to write and speak our own books of comfort and preparation. I will start it with two stories, and then you, I hope, will continue it.

Ever since August, the streets of Ferguson, Missouri have been filled with protesters. And in other streets and other cities there are those who protest in solidarity. On various occasions, there has been anger, looting, and burning in response to the death of Michael Brown. The city of Ferguson has been captive to racial strife, suffering from a new exposure of an ancient wound. Who

can speak words of comfort in that situation? The Ferguson Municipal Public Library became an ad-hoc school in the aftermath of the shooting of Michael Brown in August. They remained open long after their normal hours to be a safe place where people could gather quietly. In the aftermath of the violent protests that erupted in Ferguson on the Monday night before Thanksgiving, following the Grand Jury's decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the fatal shooting of the unarmed teenager, the city's schools and public services decided to close again. One safe place remained. Once again, it was the local public library that remained open, providing a safe place for children and others to gather. "If the Ferguson-Florissant schools close," the announcement on the library's facebook page read, "we will be hosting activities for the children. We will do everything in our power to serve our community. Stay strong and love each other." Lift up your voice with strength, O library! Comfort, O comfort my people.

Last week, Ricky Jackson, a man who served 39 years behind bars for a 1975 Cleveland murder he didn't commit, was officially declared a free man. His release comes after the sole witness in the case, who was 12 years old in 1975, admitted to lying in his testimony. The Ohio Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati had been working for years to overturn the conviction. Ricky Jackson emerged from his long imprisonment with grace. He said of his false accuser, "I guess a lot of people will want me to hate that person, but I don't...I wish him the best...he's been carrying around a burden for 39 years." When asked about his future, Jackson said he is just "living in the moment." "Life is so beautiful right now," he said. Lift up your voice with strength, O Ricky Jackson! Breathe deeply of free air on that high mountain. Comfort, O comfort my people.

I don't have a story to tell yet, but maybe sometime soon, someone will speak words of comfort to me because the tragedy at Newtown 2 years ago will be written in its own book of consolation.

"The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together," says Isaiah. One way to think about this image is that we won't see it if we harbor exclusion in our hearts. When we choose to isolate ourselves from any of our neighbors, we begin to see only our own pain and our own virtues. We may not be aware of it, but doing that makes us stumble along the rocky path of injustice and sadness – a path that causes us to circle only inward, blindly into the darkness of self-absorption.

The news media tells us that we live in a time of trouble, captivity, strife, loss of meaning. We could also say that we live in a time of transition. We need stories to tell with a sense of promise and comfort. We tell those stories to prepare ourselves when the world is not a peaceful place, when anxiety rules in our hearts, when confusion troubles our minds, when we feel captive to powers that strangle community. Those who walked with Isaiah's God and John the Baptist's God and the God of Jesus and our spiritual ancestors knew this same trouble and dissonance. But they stopped and breathed and listened. They stopped to gather and worship. They breathed in deeply so they could sing songs of expectation. They listened for the goodness in the human heart, the harmony at the heart of God's universe. This prepared them to comfort each other and change their world. Comfort, O comfort, my people.

In the season of Advent, we prepare to meet the One who travels with us on the road of life's suffering and joy. The preparation of the cradle or the manger opens our hearts to tenderness,

as we contemplate the helplessness of an infant. The story of the Mary's journey to Bethlehem prepares our hearts to be open to the strangers and the homeless ones. The story of the shepherds in the field prepares our hearts to be tender and generous to those who work at a subsistence level. The story of Herod's attack on innocence prepares our hearts to shepherd and protect the youngest among us.

But first we are called in the poetry and the ringing shouts of the prophets. In the rough places, God is speaking, trying to get our attention. In our captivity, whether physical or mental, God calls us to liberation and new life. And if we stop and listen to the cries of the world, in prayer, in word and in sacrament, we will hear and take up the shout ourselves: prepare the way for God to move and change us all.