

Isaiah 40: 1-11
2 Peter 3: 8-15a
Mark 1:18

Comfort My People
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It's hard for me to hear the words of the 40th chapter of Isaiah without hearing music in my head. George Friedrich Handel set those phrases to beautiful notes, and it's imprinted. The voice crying in the wilderness is accompanied by lullaby tones and haunting melodies. The prophet speaks in compelling poetry, offering a vision of a world and a time where warfare has ended and God is revealed as a power so great that it can only be expressed as tenderness.

Isaiah hears God say, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," or as King James and Handel say it, "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." Or, as the Hebrew literally says, "Speak to Jerusalem's heart." Comforting, comfortable words. But in order to hear the depth in those words we have to travel to a place that is not so comfortable. This section of the Book of Isaiah is hopeful, but the hope has been preceded by loss and grief. The prophet is speaking to exiles. Two generations before, their capital city and temple had been destroyed. They had been forcibly driven to a foreign country, to the rivers of Babylon, where they had to make a new life. They had to try to maintain some connection with the God who had either failed them or seemed to be punishing them. Having made the mental and social adjustments to exile, they are now given permission to return to their parents' homeland. This involves a reverse trek over the intervening desert, an arduous journey with an unknowable destination. It's a turning point, a scary opportunity, even if it is spoken in beautiful words of poetry. I wouldn't blame them if they hesitated, wondering whether captivity was preferable to the risks of new life.

Still, the prophet calls this glad tidings, or good news, or, in other words, gospel. It is such good news that we find this passage quoted in each of the four New Testament Gospels. This is the passage that came to mind when people tried to express the surprising new story given to us by Jesus. Mark's Gospel starts with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" and goes right into John the Baptist's preaching and ministry. When we hear about this John, he seems a little less than comfortable: oddly dressed, with odd eating habits, living and **staying** out in the wilderness by choice, telling people to repent, accusing the powers of his time of wickedness and injustice. His is another face of prophecy, another prophetic proclamation of good tidings, speaking to people in a different sort of captivity. I wouldn't blame people if they hesitated, wondering whether to believe this harsh, insistent voice and get in that river.

What we learn by reading through the Scriptures is that God speaks in many voices, in many tones. God cajoles, God comforts, God insists. When the people suffer, God's response is a flight of poetry to sustain them on long journeys and in dark places and difficult times. When the people get complacent, God's response can be a wake-up blast of reality. And sometimes both things are happening at once. Maybe those exiles saw the power and sophistication of Babylon and were tempted to put their trust in the obviously successful regime. The prophet reminds them that all people as fragile as grass or flowers in a field: only the word of our God will stand forever. Maybe those exiles wanted to slip into a comfortable amnesia about their covenant relationship with God.

They are reminded that the Lord is their shepherd. Maybe those exiles feared the journey home. They are reminded that the Shepherd gently leads the weak and lost.

We find in Bible stories both literal “rough places” - literal wilderness- literal journeys across the desert – and the spiritual equivalents of those situations. Offered a journey back to Jerusalem, I don’t think that the exiles were meant to start a major engineering project, leveling mountains and building major roads. But they had to get ready. They had to clear a path for God, even when that seemed daunting, to make a way when there seemed to be no road. There were inner obstacles to be removed. There were hearts to be comforted, strengthened and transformed. They had to let the words in. When we hear the beautiful words of the prophet Isaiah, or the harsher words of John, then the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the beginning of the Gospel, can unfold inside us.

We follow an old pathway, one that recognizes the loss and grief of the past and the present. Like those ancient exiles, we too have experienced loss, violence, poverty, economic crises, not to mention the personal tragedies in every life. In some ways, we cannot return to the old Jerusalem, or to former days of glory, or to security and innocence. In the face of all the hardships and injustices of life, we recognize our limitations and our fragility, as frail as grass and flowers in the wind.

But neither human frailty nor human cruelty nor human injustice have the last word. There is someone and something stronger. There is someone and something gentler, someone who speaks tender words of comfort and hope to those starting a journey. Someone who shows us a way, a kind of preparation that opens us up to glad tidings. The prophet says clear the way for God, remove obstacles and impediments, level the hills of resentment and animosity, push aside the stones of greed and complacency. Advent is a time, not just to make a nice little cradle for a new baby, but to do some heavy spiritual engineering work, opening up our hearts and minds to that tender grace. And we may hear the many voices of God as we do so, may see the many ways God enters our world with glad tidings, may be surprised by the many opportunities God opens up for us.

When Mark opens his story with the words, “The beginning of the good news...,” I like to think that he isn’t just talking about the baptism and beginnings at the Jordan River. I like to think that the entire story of Jesus is just the beginning of the good news, and that there is more to be revealed, today. There is more preaching to be done in the wilderness about the glad tidings of God’s love and faithfulness. There are more wake up calls to the wrongs and injustices and violence we inflict on each other. There are more opportunities for repentance and forgiveness. There are new roads and bridges to be built of understanding and cooperation. God speaks tenderly, and says that change is coming. God speaks loudly from the mountain, and says, “I hope you’re ready to travel. But don’t worry, I will be traveling with you.”

I am speaking all these words to you in a time that I find heavy with pain and discouragement. On Thursday, it will be the 5th anniversary of the shootings in Sandy Hook Elementary School that took the lives of 28 people, 20 of them small children. Every year since, on that day, candles have been lit here in Norwich and across the world to remember the dead and to witness to our desire for more sensible gun legislation. Every year, Hanukkah candles are lit, and some sing “Light One Candle for the Maccabee Children,” with the verse: “But light one candle for the wisdom to know when the peacemakers’ time is at hand.” Every year, we also light the candle of peace on our Advent wreath. But both gun violence and war continue unabated...in some ways,

the violence seems worse. And the prophet continues to cry “Comfort, comfort ye, my people.” I do find comfort in lighting candles, helpless as it feels. And I still look for comfort in the coming of the Christ child.

Jesus lived in a time that was simply drenched in conflict and violence. The story says that, from his very birth, he was under the threat of a violent death. The Roman Empire had no qualms about killing for gain, power, or pleasure. Crucifixion was a common method, because it was also a public humiliation, a sort of state-sponsored terrorism. Even religious communities advocated execution by stoning. I find comfort in the life of Jesus, a life of integrity in the midst of impossible tragedy. I find comfort in the way that Jesus told people to drop their stones, and put away their swords, without for a moment giving up their witness to the truth.

The challenge of the prophets’ call is for us to embody what we hear proclaimed. This means, to some extent, to live in alternative ways to the status quo: to choose wilderness, in a way. Rather than blindly participating in systems that are flawed, with all the partisan point-scoring involved, we become conscious and critical participants. We speak out when something is unjust, or greedy, or cruel, and then we live in witness to the One who was just, and generous, and tender.

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 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. We will take up the cry, O come Emmanuel, God with us, and travel with us on this journey.

I end with a prayer written by John van de Laar:
Where there seems to be no way
to end the conflict and violence in our time,
we pray that you would teach us, O Christ,
to prepare the way;

Where we can see no way
to provide for the needs of all people,
we pray that you would show us, O Christ,
how to prepare the way;

Where can find no way
to work together for justice,
we pray that you would change us, O Christ,
until we prepare the way;

Where we are unable to believe in a way
to live simply, responsibly and mindfully,
we pray that you would inspire us, O Christ,
to faith that prepares the way;

In a world where we are tempted
to see so many of our challenges as dead-ends,
we pray for a new vision, a new heart and a new commitment
to prepare the way for your reign,
your grace,
your shalom
and for the liberation, justice and peace that you bring. Amen.