

Isaiah 40:1-11 Bill Uetrict 2 Advent 12.7.23

This past Tuesday afternoon I visited four women, three in the hospital and one in her home. Some of these women might die very soon, while others may linger for a bit. Each visit, though, was about death in one way or another. During the hospital visitations, I ran into a doctor friend of mine who told me about some developments in an organization that we both love. He said that things were getting personal, that relationships were being harmed. He was hoping that this wouldn't be permanent. Life-giving relationships were beginning to die.

Sometimes I must admit that I tire of death. It's relentless. It doesn't go away. Sometimes I long for some good news.

On the evening of that night, I prepared for Tuesday evening compline. I looked at the readings for the weekend, and in the very first words that I read, I confronted this message from Isaiah 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term."

"Comfort." Tuesday afternoon I was looking for some comfort. I don't know why but that afternoon was particularly brutal to me. Oh, it's not that it was all about me. It wasn't. It was about the pain that so many people have to go through. I was hurting deeply, particularly for those who are younger and must endure life's unfairness. I wanted to be comforted, and I wanted to comfort.

The message of Isaiah 40 almost plops onto the scene. For 39 chapters we get a lot of bad news. Oh, here and there in those chapters we get some beautiful poetry that speaks of a future of unity and the renewal of creation. But mostly, in the first portion of Isaiah we get a lot of bad news, a lot of judgment, a lot of death. And then boom!

"Comfort, O comfort my people."

There is a rational explanation for this jarring move. More than likely, we are dealing with writings that come from two separate times

in Israel's history. Isaiah is without a doubt a product of an editor. We're moving into a new time with our reading for today, a time of great hope, a time when the evil Babylonians are no longer ruling, and the more tolerant Persians are.

It's a new day, and so we hear: "Comfort, O comfort *my* people." This isn't "your kid" or "the wife." This is *my* people. These are words of intimacy, the language of fondness, language that serves to build relationships like marriage, by the way. *My* people. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." Jerusalem had been devastated by the Babylonians. Their temple had been destroyed. Death had seemed relentless. But now there is a word of tenderness. Isaiah tells Jerusalem that it's a new day. He describes that new day as an end to a jail sentence. "Cry to [Jerusalem] that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

She has suffered more than enough. Yes, Jerusalem had sinned. And yes, there were consequences for her sin. But that is all so yesterday. That's the past. It's a new day. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of the fact that Judah has finally repented enough or turned itself around. We don't hear that she has finally gotten her act together and that now she is at long last behaving. No! God just says that a new day has dawned. The exile, seen as punishment, is over. Comfort is on its way. Good news is on its way. Do you hear the voice? It's crying out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Isn't it interesting that in the Bible we spend so much time in the wilderness? Moses and Israel roam there for forty years. Elijah spends time in the wilderness. Jesus finds himself in the wilderness. The wilderness is the place of absence. The wilderness is the place for testing. The wilderness is the lonely place. And today, the wilderness is the place for a voice to speak, a voice of goodness. Don't despise the

wilderness. Don't hate the sense of absence. The wilderness, although a weary place, is sometimes the place from which the voice speaks. And today, that voice is a voice of good news.

"Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, do not fear, say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God.'"

It's a strange notion. God is said to be coming home. It's almost as if God was thought to have left town. He was so mad at Judah for its sin that he slammed the cupboard door and walked out of the house. But now he's coming home. He's coming back. It's time to prepare the way. It's time to make straight in the desert a highway for him. It's time to lift the valleys up and make the mountains low. It's time for the uneven ground to become level and the rough places a plain. God is coming home. Love is on its way.

One of my favorite Christmas songs is the iconic, "I'll be home for Christmas. You can count on me." The song was originally written during WWII with a concern for the American soldiers who were in Europe fighting a war. It taps into a desire that so many of us have of a happy Christmas with all the family gathered in the warmth of our beautifully decorated homes. We all dream not only of a white Christmas but of a Christmas that is ideal, one in which everybody is home and warmth and sentimentality reign. Truthfully, I am a guy who likes warmth and sentimentality and cries at the drop of a hat. I long for the celebrations to go well and for family to be the ideal coming together of love and grace.

But the first message of this season is not that I am coming home, that my kids are coming home, that the perfect Christmas is what we all should seek and frantically work to accomplish. No, the first message of the season is that God is coming home. God is on God's way.

In essence, this is John the Baptist's message, although he is preparing the way for *Jesus*. Note again that the voice of John is appearing in the wilderness. This isn't a voice that is showing up at church. Frankly, it's an alternative to the voice of religion as usual. The religious leaders want folks to come to the temple where they will give money to offer their sacrifices. They need people and their money to prop up their system, but John is out in the wilderness offering an alternative to the temple system. He's proclaiming forgiveness without all the trappings.

Now don't run away from the church. It's so essential for living out the life of faith. But don't be surprised that those who prepare us for God and, yes, for Jesus, often are often found outside of the confines of churchiness. They may be discovered on the fringes, on the edges, out in the wilderness. John is out in the wilderness, and he is preparing the way for Jesus, for the one who will be up to big things, God things, spirit things. This one who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit, will connect us to the God who is coming home.

Mark starts his book, and some think, titles his book, with these words: "The beginning of the good news, [the gospel], of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Plopped into a time when Roman warfare, Roman persecution, and Roman-induced death is reigning, the gospel of Mark begins its story with comfort, with good news: the kingdom of God is on its way. God's way of doing things is on its way. The big picture is on its way. And it will be discovered in one named Jesus. He will embody, he will live the presence of God. He will make it clear that God has come home. God has come to a home to a home and to homes that are anything but ideal. He has come home to homes that are battered by death and dysfunction. Comfort, O Comfort my people.

The sermon concluded with "Comfort Ye" from the Messiah.