

Isaiah 40:1-11 Pastor Bill Uetricht 12/6/20 2 Advent

Joel Dulyea sang "Comfort Ye" from Handel's Messiah

Comfort, O comfort my people!

Comfort. It's what I am longing for now. It's what we need. It's what I want to speak. Day after day, the news is traumatic. A couple of weeks ago three of our members died from Covid. Fourteen residents of Muskegon County died from Covid on Tuesday of this week. All kinds of our friends and relatives are sick from this horrible virus or are dying from it. A Muskegon man, and a friend of some of yours, walks out to get the mail and is hit by a car and dies. A set of twins walks away from their home and falls into a pool. One of those is clinging to his life right now. And in the midst of all of this, people are arguing about election results and are claiming that they have a *right* to eat inside of restaurants and not to wear masks. I am not feeling very comforted.

Comfort, comfort! Those words seem to be out of place; they seem to be arbitrarily dropped into the middle of our situation—a situation that truly is an experience of trauma. These words seem to come without warrant, being placed in our laps when comfort is what we truly want but appears to be far from what is real.

If you were to read the book of Isaiah, you would note that most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are not real happy. God is angry with Judah, pointing out their idolatry, their unwillingness to care for the poor, their social injustice. Listen to these words from the 30th chapter:

Go now, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, so that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a rebellious people, faithless children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'Do not see', and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions.'

Tell us, in other words, what we want to hear because we don't want to face the truth. That's the kind of stuff you get from Isaiah in the first section. Words of challenge, not words of comfort. And then boom, in chapter forty, comfort drops into our laps, surprisingly, unexpectedly, in some ways, without warrant.

What we do know about this portion of Isaiah (the part that begins with our text for today in chapter 40) is that it was likely written at a new time in Judah's history. Isaiah was, without a doubt, an edited book that was written at three different times. Second Isaiah, which is our concern today, was probably penned after the horrible national trauma that was the Babylonian invasion of Judah, an invasion that included the devastation of the city of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple there. You will note that the message of comfort is to fall onto the ears of Jerusalem: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

Well, have things changed in Jerusalem when Second Isaiah is writing? Yes and no. The Babylonians are gone, and the Persians have arrived on the scene. Truthfully, the Persians are much nicer. They are friendlier to Jewish religion. So, good news *is* on the horizon. We could call that good news a vaccine or vaccines. The sun is starting to rise. But some things are still the same. Jerusalem is still a mess. The temple is still in ruins. And there is no guarantee that the exiles, the folks who were forced by the Babylonians to leave Judah, will actually come home. Maybe they will like their new home in Babylon. And what's more, not only has Jerusalem not really changed, the wondering is whether the people have really changed? You've heard the saying, "Wherever you go, **you** go. It's the same broken people God is dealing with. Just a new time.

I think that is part of Isaiah's message when one of the members of the heavenly court says, "Cry out! And I [perhaps Isaiah himself] said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower

of the field. The grass withers. The flower fades; surely the people are grass.’”

Now this could be a reference to those nasty old Babylonians. You know, they come and they go, something worth our while remembering. But it also could be a reference to the character of God’s people. They are fickle. It’s a new day, but it’s the same old people. Now this can be a deeply depressing message—you know, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. Yet on the other hand, it can be a helpful antidote to our naïve expectations: the people in our lives are just going to change and everything will be better! Maybe or maybe not.

But the message of comfort doesn’t come from Isaiah because of the expectation that we will all get our acts together. No. comfort comes because God just decides to bring it, to drop it into the laps of his people. There is no evidence that they have gotten their act together. God says that he has just had enough:

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her 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.

I must admit that I am not overly enthralled with this kind of analysis. You know, bad things happened because we sinned. Many Biblical writers, particularly the prophets of the Old Testament, are much more comfortable in that worldview than I am. For me, I live more in the “life-happens” world. I don’t always see an intimate connection between the bad that occurs to us and our sinfulness. You know as well as I do, the train wreck that that view can be: he suffered a lot, he died because he did naughty things. Very often that is a less than sophisticated way for us to think that life and its destructive character will not affect us. I have heard that with the virus. I won’t get it: I exercise, take vitamin D, or have superior genes. Ya, right! Life just happens sometimes. And don’t think you are exempt from its happening.

Now having said all of that, though, I must admit that perhaps the ancients had a perspective that is worth listening to. Our brokenness and the suffering of the world are not disconnected. We don't live life without some reason for guilt or shame. And even if we cannot always identify the reason—and those who have been through great trauma will tell you this—we still know guilt and shame, even when it doesn't make any sense.

Comfort, comfort, my people. *My people. My people.* My broken people. My hurt people. My traumatized people. You, we together, are the people of God. Yes, sometimes we are like grass that withers, flowers that fade. Yes, life has happened to you, to me. Yes, we have done our part to make life a mess. Yes, trauma is real, bringing deep grief, crippling us, even sometimes making us aware of our brokenness. But there is something larger than the brokenness, larger than the trauma.

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

Sometimes the only message of hope and comfort is this: "Here... is...your God." In the midst of trauma, national and local, "here...is... your...God."

He will feed his flock, like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them [close to him], and he will gently lead the mother sheep.

The most vulnerable he will tend to. And he will do so with gentleness. "Here is your God." A shepherd. A gentle God. A vulnerable God.

You know, the most helpful people to us are those who have been there, those whose vulnerability resonates with our own vulnerability. Comfort comes today not simply from the God of the universe, the God

of might, but from the God of great intimacy, from the God of great vulnerability. It is such a God that Advent anticipates, that Advent prepares a way for.

We're going to meet this God in a little baby born in a lowly manger. Some ordinary, smelly, lower-class shepherds are going to visit him. And this baby will grow up, only to be traumatized by religious and political authorities. They'll nail him to a cross. Hanging on that tree, he will be more vulnerable than we would ever want him to be. And maybe we won't be able to make it to the high mountain, nor will we be able to lift up our voices with much strength, but, nonetheless, we will still say: here is our God. A vulnerable, suffering, dying God.

Comfort, comfort, my people! We're not only in this together with each other. We're in it together with the gentle, suffering, vulnerable, dying God of Jesus Christ. "Comfort, ye!" (sung)