

## **“At Last, Comfort!”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

12-6-20 Second Sunday of Advent

Based upon Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

“Comfort, O comfort my people,” God commands in today’s prophecy from *Isaiah*. For music-loving Christians, it’s hard to hear these words and not also hear in your head the voice of a great tenor singing them as Handel famously set them to music. In the score of his *Messiah*, no sooner does God say these words, then the music swoops off into the fun part where the music matches the text as valleys are exalted and the rough places made plain. I love listening to the *Messiah* this time of year. But if we can force ourselves mentally to set Handel aside for a minute, I’d like us to ponder, like the heavenly council God was addressing in today’s text, exactly what kind of message God had in mind. Preachers have long been taught that in order to do our job right we must “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” But that assumes that one can tell the difference, which is hard to do these days when everyone seems to be afflicted in one way or another. That was also the case in Isaiah’s day. When these words were first spoken, both the rich and poor of Judah, the powerful and powerless, were in exile in a foreign land. Everyone was afflicted. What words could possibly comfort them then?

For years, the only words that Isaiah had been called to preach were words designed to afflict the comfortable. The people of Judah had gone astray from God. They had betrayed their covenant vows and corrupted God’s kingdom. They had become so entrenched in their unfaithfulness that when God first called Isaiah, which is recorded all the way back in Chapter 6 of this book, God was so frustrated with the people that God basically told Isaiah five minutes after calling him that his prophetic ministry would be pointless. The Israelites weren’t going to listen or comprehend, and that was fine with God because God had had enough. It was time for some tough love, time for them to reap what they had sown. Still, Isaiah had tried valiantly to turn their hearts. He pointed out their arrogance and oppressive ways. He rationally explained the absurdity of their idolatry. He even tried to inspire them to faithfulness by painting pictures of a peaceable kingdom that they could dwell in one day. Nothing worked. So, by the time we get to Chapter 39, the chapter which immediately precedes today’s lesson, all Isaiah does is name the inevitable. To King Hezekiah, who had just shown visiting emissaries from Babylon all that he owned as part of his plan to get them to ally with him against Assyria, Isaiah said with disgust and resignation, “Everything you just showed them will one day be theirs because they are going to crush Judah like a bug and take your children away into slavery.” “Oh good,” Hezekiah thinks, with shockingly callous self-absorption, “that means at least my days will still be peaceful.”

Isaiah’s prophecy came true, and the people were taken away. But you don’t get to hear or read any of that story in today’s text or anywhere else in the book of *Isaiah*. In the little quarter inch of white space between Chapters 39 and 40, volumes are left unspoken, in much the same way that in the *Apostles’ Creed* all of Jesus’ life and teachings are reduced to a comma between “being born to a virgin” and “suffering under Pontius Pilate.” 160 years of history go unmentioned in between these two chapters. During those years Assyria collapsed, and Babylon rose. During those years, good king Josiah reigned, tried to reform Judah, and died. During those

years, his unfaithful and incompetent sons created anarchy in the kingdom, allowing Babylon to loom as a greater and greater threat until just as Isaiah had predicted, the empire totally destroyed Jerusalem, its king, the Temple, and in the eyes of some, possibly Yahweh too. So much suffering happened during those years that there was almost too much to put in writing. Do you know what I mean? It's like now when we are all supposed to be writing our Christmas cards about what 2020 was like. Who wants to relive, let alone recount, the psychological, physical, political, economic, and spiritual challenges we have experienced in the last nine months? There are no words that can both do justice to what we have experienced and be adequately sensitive to the fact that our friends may have suffered still more. Skipping over it all seems the only option. "Dear Friends, lots of bad stuff happened this year. It's still happening. Hope you are well. Merry Christmas."

Needless to say, since we are talking about 160 years of unspoken misery, when we pick up the story again in Chapter 40, the Isaiah who is speaking is not the same one who worked so hard for 39 chapters to change the people's ways. Now we get a prophet whom scholars call "Second Isaiah" being given a call experience of his own. But amazingly, mercifully, his job is not to afflict the comfortable but to comfort the afflicted! At long last there is good news to be shared. God was kicking off "Operation Comfort," and it was going to be so big that God wanted the whole heavenly council involved to assist Second Isaiah. "You all must provide comfort; comfort them!" God says using a plural imperative that gets lost in translation. Tell "my people" that their penalty is paid. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."

The first of God's heavenly staff to speak up seems to miss the tenderness requirement of the plan, offering instead the kind of comfort that first Isaiah knew well, the kind that comes with requirements. "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord," he cries out. In other words, "Clean up your act. Flatten the high places, raise up the low places, make a highway because God is coming to town." In those days conquering emperors would send military teams ahead to prepare a grand entrance for them, like Hollywood assistants rolling out the red carpet. Now the voice suggests something similar but on a cosmic scale, which is why I picked the bulletin cover I did, which looks like a natural red carpet spreading out through the wilderness. "Rework creation itself," the voice cries, "make everything that is wrong right. Prepare the way to receive the Lord your liberator." John the Baptist, who has long been associated with this part of the prophecy thanks to *Mark's* description of his ministry in the wilderness, liked this kind of comfort that comes with a bite. "The good news is that God is coming," John preached. "The bad news is that you aren't remotely ready for it. If you stay the way you are, God will be disgusted with you. Repent now while you have a chance. Prepare the way!"

Not everyone in God's counsel was focused on personal and wilderness improvements that day, however. Second Isaiah was there, the Isaiah who knew only exile and suffering. Would you tell a slave or a prisoner that he had to change the world and call that offering comfort? No. Neither would Isaiah. It was very good news that God felt Israel had been punished enough, but the people were still in exile. Would they believe him if Isaiah told them God was alive and well and coming to set them free? Would they believe him if Isaiah told them that God still loved them and referred to them as "my people" if Isaiah told them they had to move mountains for God? Isaiah didn't know. So, when another voice looked at him and said in a

commanding and perhaps impatient voice, “Cry out!”, Isaiah didn’t jump to echo either God’s message of time-served, or the sort of militaristic, home-make over comfort campaign that the other voice was promoting.

“What shall I cry?” he says, “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades...” Whenever I read these words, I hear them spoken in the depressive voice of Eeyore in my mind. I hear a tired and hopeless overworked spiritual leader thinking, “What’s the point? Life is fleeting and filled with suffering. Human promises are often short-lived or empty. What can I say that will offer real comfort to a people who are still miles from home? What can I say that will make them believe there is real reason to hope or that changing is worthwhile?” Flash forward to today, and it is easy to see Isaiah’s point. What can be said to comfort hospital workers who haven’t slept in months and are having to make impossible choices about people’s lives that they never dreamed they would have to make in U.S. hospitals? A vaccine is coming? Great, but that doesn’t help them right now when they are burned out and struggling. What can be said to people who are out of work and out of savings, or those who are grieving the loss of family members to COVID-19, depression, or racial violence? Things are going to get better? We all want that to be true. But how can they cope with their losses in the meantime?

There are certain people, me included, who feel energized by the kind of self-improvement projects the first voice and John the Baptist called for. Even if they are feeling down, having something to work on cheers certain kinds of people up by giving them a sense of purpose and control. But for other people, maybe most people, telling them that they need to flatten mountains before God will come isn’t comforting, nor it is comforting to dismiss the reality of their suffering by offering platitudes like “Everything will be OK.” OK according to whom, and when? Author/theologian Marva Dawn has written about her experience with these well-intentioned forms of comfort and why they don’t work. “Many years ago, in the first of what has turned out to be a twenty-year series of health crises, some of my well-meaning friends offered me nothing but human comfort. They attempted to cheer me with such comments as ‘It will be all right,’ or ‘A lot of people suffer severe illnesses,’ or ‘Soon you can go back to living a normal life.’ The problem with those words was that they had no basis, no substance, no reality. Things may turn out all right, but at that moment, in a time of pain, it did not seem that way... [T]hose statements made me feel all the more guilty .... and so discouraged me all the more.”<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah didn’t know what to say. So, another voice, maybe God’s or maybe one of the other council members, gave him the words that he needed. Picking up Isaiah’s depressive refrain the voice said, “Yes, the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever. Tell Zion and Jerusalem the good news, God is coming with might and power to reward the people and make up for their suffering. God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom.” (Is. 40:8-11). In other words, the comfort Isaiah was called to proclaim wasn’t comfort grounded in the people’s current circumstances, or in their willingness to reform themselves and their world. It wasn’t

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<sup>1</sup> Dawn, Marva, To Walk and Not Faint: A Month of Meditations on Isaiah 40 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 3.

pie-in-the-sky human optimism which may or may not be grounded in fact either. The comforting assurances Isaiah was called to share were grounded in the promises of God, which are reliable, true, and unstoppable. God's still considered the Israelites to be God's people, so they were. God knew they had suffered greatly and wanted to care for them tenderly with love, so God would. What God says goes because God's word doesn't describe or speculate, it creates.

The rest of this chapter reminds us of this truth by providing a lengthy litany about all of the things in the universe God has created with nothing more than a word. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighted the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance...." (Is. 40:12). It culminates in the powerful words that have comforted the suffering for centuries: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up on wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Is. 40:28-31). In other words, God, who is in the business of making and flattening mountains and everything else, was going to roll out God's own red carpet in the wilderness without waiting for Babylon or the people to change. Comfort, *God's* comfort, was guaranteed because God promised to offer it personally.

Interestingly, it was this very kind of assurance which ultimately brought Marva Dawn comfort. Instead of telling her to cheer up or change, someone from her congregation responded to her suffering simply by saying, "The Lord is with you, and I care." "What a sweet comfort," she writes, "it is to be reminded in the midst of pain and grief and guilt that God is there beside us, inside us, not condemning, to give us his everlasting solace! Words of comfort from a human perspective will pass away, but the truth about our eternal, unchanging, and caring Father will continue to abide and to offer comfort that endures."<sup>2</sup>

This is the comfort that God offers us now in this season of waiting for our pandemic-inspired exile and suffering to end. The message of Advent is that God is coming to comfort us in person. Our hope and our peace come not from our circumstances or from well-intentioned promises of human beings which can fade like flowers, but from God's promise that we will be comforted: "I will be with you and will hold you like lambs in my shepherd arms." It is a promise that we know already came true in Christ, so we, even more than the Israelites, know that we can trust in it. But it is also a promise which has yet to come true in the sense of Christ coming again and ridding the world of all suffering through him. We live in between the already and the not yet. But the already is more than enough to make a difference if you believe. It means you are not alone. It means there is always reason to hope. So, whenever your heart and mind are weary with waiting, or sound, as Anne Lamott put it, like they are doing a native American chant, "Worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, worry, Worry, worry, worry..." listen for Advent's reply spoken through a prophet who knew the worst of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

worries.<sup>3</sup> It says: “Promise, promise, promise, promise, promise” and “Comfort, comfort, comfort, comfort,” “Coming Now, now, now, now.” God is with us in exile and will show us the way home. God has done this before and will do it again and again and again because the word of the Lord lasts forever.

When the psalmist wrote Number 85, our other text for today, he prayed, “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people.” His words remind me of the time, according to John, when the risen Christ first visited his disciples. “Peace be with you.” he said twice, in much the same way that God says “Comfort” twice in today’s text from *Isaiah* to convey, “I’m not just saying it, I really mean it!” (John 20:19-23). Then to ensure that it would be so, Jesus breathed on them filling them with his peace. It wasn’t the kind of peace that comes from the absence of conflict, challenge, or suffering. It was shalom, the kind of peace that comes from finding wholeness, love, and refreshment in God’s saving grace. In this season of waiting, may you find your comfort in Christ’s shalom, and in God’s indestructible word, which makes and shapes reality. God is our help and hope and promise, now and always. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamott, Anne, Facebook Page “Anne Lamott,” Post, Nov. 29, 2020, 1 p.m., [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).