

"CRYING OUT FOR COMFORT"
 Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8
 December 6, 2020 Advent 2
 York Center Church of the Brethren
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Anyone else in need of comfort or am I the only one? I cannot remember an Advent season when we were more in need of comfort. Comfort food. Comfort music. Comfort blankets. Comfort dogs. Comfort cats. Comfort is described as "a sense of physical or psychological ease, often characterized as a lack of hardship." Although most of us probably live in physical comfort more often than not; what I worry about these days is the disruption of our psychological and emotional comfort.

Most of us have been moved out of our respective comfort zones for over nine months now. As the world unraveled, we had to find new ways of doing very ordinary things- going to school, going to work, buying groceries, seeing family and friends, even worshipping. Suddenly everything tilted and we had to tilt with it- or fall over. We are still trying to figure out how to do that.

I had been thinking about how Advent is a terrible time for a pandemic. We have so many traditions and rituals at this time of year- things that are so important to us that we now have to change or just let go of. We can't even sing Christmas carols together. Taking the kids to see Santa behind a plexiglass shield is a whole new experience.

But then, on Friday afternoon, as I was trying to wrestle my uncooperative thoughts into a coherent sermon, it suddenly occurred to me. Maybe a pandemic is the **perfect** time for Advent. Because what is Advent but preparation for the divine upheaval.

Kate Bowler writes, *"Advent is preparation for the great inversion: God coming to Earth in the form of a human baby; the ruler of the cosmos trapped in a squalling package of helpless flesh. This inversion flips all of our expectations, systems of power, and narratives on their head. Right now, it might feel as if our world has turned upside-down already, so this may not sound very joyful. But this inversion comes with expectant hope, that when the world is out of sorts, Jesus comes to be 'God with us.'"*

Advent invites us to live in hopeful anticipation during a season of suffering and fear and uncertainty. When we just don't know quite when it's going to be okay, Advent reminds us that it will be.

Our first word of scripture on this second Sunday of Advent is "Comfort." And it comes to us from the prophet Isaiah. We know that God's prophets were always quick with a word of judgment so it may surprise us to hear these words of tenderness. At the end of chapter 39 we hear that word of judgment when the prophet tells King Hezekiah, *"Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up to this day, will be carried off to Babylon. God says that nothing will be left. Your own sons will be taken away to serve the king of Babylon."*

And then—prophetic silence—a gap in the book of Isaiah- for generations. And do you know where the people were during that gap? Living in exile, as prisoners, in Babylon, the home of their enemy.

After this terrible time of silence and suffering, there finally comes a word from God. And that word is an unbelievably bold word of hope about the presence of God in the events of human history. "Comfort, comfort my people!"

Chapter 40 opens not on earth but in heaven, in the nerve center of the universe, in the midst of God's divine council. All the beings of heaven are gathered around and God says to them: *"Comfort my people, They have suffered long enough. They have paid for their sins. Let's bring them home."*

And with those divine words, the broken covenant relationship between God and God's people has been restored, healed, renewed. The word from the prophet, probably spoken on Babylonian soil to a people who had all but given up on God promised this: all of God's resources are being put into comfort, pardon, and redemption for you, God's people. The prophet promises a new exodus as God builds a highway through the desert wilderness from exile to freedom; from Babylon to Jerusalem. They are going home.

Everything they had put their hope in had been destroyed and taken away from them- their home, their temple, their city, their identity, Now the prophet tells them that their hope is based on the only power that never fails- the power and the promise of the God who created them. The rebellious, selfish, sinful nature of the people does not have the last word. Exile does not have the last word. The last word- and the first word- is spoken by the One who speaks tenderly, offers comfort, and gathers the lambs in gentle arms.

The prophet cries out, "Here is your God!" With these words the people move from their experience of divine absence to divine presence. They move from tragedy to blessing. They begin to once again, live into the promises of God. In the midst of devastation and despair, hopelessness and certain destruction, the exiles hear the good news; God is here. God is victorious. God reigns.

Take note that one of the main reasons the Israelites ended up living in exile was because they rebelled against God by selfishly ignoring the needs of their neighbors. They turned their backs on others. But now the word of judgment is in the past and Isaiah is called to speak a word of comfort, a word of hope for a new future.

There is no way the returning captives can go back to "normal." Normal doesn't exist anymore. Not one building has been left standing in their beloved city of Jerusalem. Farms and fields have been destroyed and poisoned. Families have been separated, many people have been killed. They had to begin again. It was to be a new day. The people who had erased any thoughts of the future from their minds now find that God is doing something new- with and for - them.

A few thousand years later the word of God through Isaiah comes to life again in the Gospel of Mark. This time we are not in Babylon or Jerusalem- but in the wilderness. And the rogue truth-teller is a wild and crazy kind of guy named John. No sweet baby Jesus birth stories for Mark. He starts his Gospel right off with John to show how his presence and preaching fulfilled the scriptures. Mark showed how God's promises in the past lead right into John's call for repentance which prepares the people to receive the One they've been waiting for- the Messiah.

Everything about John calls the people to remember the Old Testament prophets- his location in the wilderness, his clothing, even his menu. John is calling them to look back so they can link the coming One with the tradition and history of Judaism. This good news John is announcing isn't something he just made up. It is connected to the past promises of God; the One who brought them out of slavery, out of exile; the One who called them to be God's people.

Through his Gospel, Mark teaches us to see God by looking to Jesus. And John the Baptist is the one who points us in the right direction. John is the one who says, "Look here! Right here! Here is your God!" John translated the words of the tradition into words they could understand. Mark wrote, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." And immediately the people remembered the words spoken by Isaiah when the people of Israel were at one of the lowest points in their history.

John said, "If you want to be a part of this promise you need to get ready. You need to repent, you need to turn away from sin, and turn back to God. Baptism was the gift he offered to them.

Karoline Lewis writes, *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ reaches back to the promises of God and helps us imagine God-filled realities both now and in our future life with God. The opening of Mark's Gospel reminds us of the*

de-centering of God's good news which is found on the edge... of everything. We find ourselves standing in the crowd, not in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem but outside the high city walls, in the margins, on the sidelines.

The good news of God brings hope to those who find themselves on the peripheries of our world, but it also belongs there. God's good news of grace announces God's presence on the fringe, God's love that goes beyond the boundaries of where we thought God was supposed to be, and God's promise that there is no place on earth God will not go or be for us."

And just think about where we find ourselves this morning. We are used to gathering inside the church building, inside those solid walls and strong roof, sitting in those familiar pews. But now we too find ourselves outside of those boundaries. We are marginalized by a pandemic. We no longer equate our worship with a building- now we worship from our homes- in our living rooms, on our back porches, at our kitchen tables. There are no longer any boundaries and that can make us feel insecure, vulnerable. But look at where John met people- far from the Temple with its elaborate religious trappings and traditions. He met them in the wilderness where the structures of the religious institution and the power of the Empire couldn't obscure and obliterate his message.

Maybe for the first time we feel as though we are spiritually in exile- in a foreign place- even from the comfort of our homes. We are in new territory without any rules or maps or guidebooks. We have lived through a chaotic, unprecedented, scary, confusing year. We are grappling with Covid-fatigue, worrying about the economy, sick over blatant injustice, and perhaps concerned about the very existence and future of our democracy. And into this unraveling world comes the voice of God's prophets reminding us that God is not done yet! God is still at work! And God is at work even and especially through us for we are not yet what we have been called to be.

In this season of Advent as we reflect on how God closed the distance between us through Jesus- perhaps we should think about how we can close the distance between us- right here, right now.

We may be exhausted, but we are not helpless. Even our small gestures of love will have a big impact. Isaiah and John aren't the only ones called by God to cry out and prepare the way. All of us are called. God is continuing the story of the good news of Jesus in and through our words and our actions. Each of us will have a hundred and one opportunities this very week to contribute to that sacred story, to make it come alive, to help keep God's promises. Gestures offered in love participate in the ongoing work of God, who is love.

In this pandemic Advent season we show God's love when we refrain from gathering in person for worship, when we limit our visits with loved ones and friends to phone calls and computer screens, when we wear a mask in public, when we buy from small businesses, when we send a donation to a charitable organization, when we write a note of encouragement to someone who is struggling, when we make a phone call to someone who is alone.

Each small act of love contradicts the pervasive lie that one person cannot make a difference.

What if we are among the ones who are called to offer comfort, healing, forgiveness, and mercy in this time- in whatever small way we can?

What if we are among the ones who are called to welcome the Advent inversion of the world?

What if we are among the ones who are called to live with expectant hope, knowing that when the world is upside down, Jesus comes to be with us, as one of us?

Comfort, comfort O my people, says our God.

May it be so.

Amen.