

Advent 2
Comfort & Repentance
December 6, 2020
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” If you are familiar with Handel’s Messiah, you might be singing this phrase in your head right now. It sounds different to me this year. Advent seems different this year.

Last week, we spoke about the historical context of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah is actually three parts, written in three different time periods, with completely different tones. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39 was written before exile, while the people were secure, comfortable, and complacent. The prophet warns the people again and again that God is not pleased with their actions, their living. Isaiah specifically calls out their wealth, their mistreatment of the poor and the oppressed, their neglect of the orphan, their arrogance, their worship of idols, their pride, their pretense of worship while they act unjustly in their daily lives. Their fancy clothes on the backs of the poor. Their building of large ornate houses with empty rooms. “The spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor.” 3:14-15. Repent, calls the prophet. God sees all of this. God does not take this lightly.

The shift in tone from chapter 39 to 40 is dramatic. What happens between First Isaiah and Second Isaiah? Babylonian exile. Assyria comes in, destroys the temple, sacks and burns the city of Jerusalem, takes many of the people captive and carries them into exile, far away from their homeland. Those who are left are the poor, left in a land that has been burned and destroyed. Everything that gave meaning to this people, the foundations of their understanding of God and of themselves, has been shaken and destroyed.

In the context of this crisis, the prophetic word changes. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. No longer is it a word of chastisement. Now, in the situation of utter crisis, it is a word of comfort.

Because I’m a dictionary nerd, I looked up the definition of the word ‘comfort’. Google dictionary says that comfort is the easing or alleviation of a person’s feelings of grief or distress. Merriam Webster: to give strength and hope; to cheer; to ease the grief or trouble of. Synonyms include assistance, support, solace. Dictionary.com says comfort is to soothe, console, to reassure. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

I've been reflecting on the ways that people seek comfort. How do we try to alleviate our pain, our grief, our suffering? Some of us seek comfort in alcohol, drugs, painkillers, food. There's an entire category of food called "comfort food." Some seek comfort through shopping, keeping ourselves busy with activities, overworking. Some of us seek comfort by helping other people, turning our focus toward the "less fortunate". Some of us seek comfort in hobbies: hiking, being outside, camping, music, art. One of my sources of comfort has always been exercise: I love group fitness, and for years, have found comfort in the classes that I attend or teach, kickboxing, weightlifting, dance. We may seek comfort in our loved ones, in community, in therapy, in connection, in church. We may seek comfort in a warm bath, comfortable sweatpants, fuzzy socks. We may seek comfort in nostalgia, escaping to the past, when things as we remember them were easier, happier, simpler.

There are so many ways that we seek comfort. Obviously, some of them are healthier than others. Most of them can be used as an escape, a way around addressing the actual hurt, the actual source of pain or grief. We try to push away the grief, ignore it, turn off our hearts by overworking our brains or bodies. When we do this, the alleviation is temporary. It is more about numbing and less about healing. This kind of comfort seeking may cause more damage than good, because we only get sicker the longer we refuse to treat the source of the illness.

When I was in seminary, my Systematic theology professor Dr. Kendall Soulen introduced a framework that has been foundational for me. He talked about theology as looking at these three things: 1) Who God is; 2) What God has done/is doing/will do; 3) what do we do about it? Let's look at the Isaiah passage through this lens.

First, who God is. In this text, God is a comforter. God speaks tenderly, words of reassurance. God is both the mighty warrior, who is able to save them, able to do such powerful things as leveling the field; and God is a gentle, nurturing shepherd, who feeds the flock and gathers the lambs in his arms.

Second: what God has done/is doing/will do. There is a pointed reminder here of what God has done in referencing the wilderness. The people are reminded that after God liberated them from slavery in Egypt, God led them in the wilderness. For the 40 years they spent in the wilderness, God took care of them, provided them everything they needed, guided them along the way, and formed them into a people. God was present with them as they journeyed through the wilderness. God is with them now, present, speaking to them words of comfort and calling them.

God will make everything right. Just. God will level the field, lifting up the valleys, bringing low the mountains, revealing God's glory to everyone together. It's the Dream of God, the New Heaven and the New Earth vision that we talked about last week, where justice, equality, and the beloved community is reality for all. That chasm between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed, the comfortable and the desperate, the overfed and the hungry, the homeless and those who have empty bedrooms: God will level it all, level us all.

And so: what do we do about it? This is a good place to jump over to our Gospel text from Mark. Mark is also being written in a time of crisis. Again, the people have been crushed, the temple destroyed, the city burned. Again, they are laid low. On this 2nd Sunday of Advent, we read from the very beginning of the Gospel of Mark. Mark does not begin with Mary and Joseph or an infant Jesus. Mark's Gospel starts fast: the good news of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark connects Jesus back to Isaiah 40 through John the Baptist, "The voice crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

John the Baptist appears in the wilderness (what did we just say about the wilderness?) proclaiming a baptism of forgiveness for the repentance of sins. People from the countryside and the city flocked to him, confessing their sins and being baptized in the river Jordan.

Repentance is the message of John. This is always the message of this 2nd Sunday of Advent, as we prepare and await the coming of Jesus. What is repentance? The word repent, *metanoia* in Greek, means to change one's mind. It is a complete change; entailing a changing of will. This word is the Greek version of the OT Hebrew word "shub" = to turn around. This was the main word of the Old Testament Prophets. Turn around. Turn back to God. It implies a physical turning, a whole new direction.

John the Baptist calls us, in Advent, to turn back to God. We so often lose our way, we lose our focus on God, lose our Jesus-centered direction and find ourselves turned, toward our jobs, our careers, our possessions, our families, our nationalism, our idea of success. The prophets call us to turn back to the journey of following God. Repent. Turn around. Turn back.

Repentance and confession get a bad rap; they seem negative, like something we would want to avoid. It means that I'm doing something wrong. It means that I have to admit that I have screwed up. But repentance and confession are life giving. They are healing practices. Rather than finding shallow, temporary comfort

by ignoring or numbing, with confession and repentance, we acknowledge the disease, the hurt, the injury, so that we can be healed and made well. That is what salvation is. To be healed; made whole by the radical love of God, who is both tender and just.

In these days, when life is hard, when we are lonely and scared and isolated. When people can be rude, and mean, and angry. When life is overwhelming and our anxiety makes everything harder, Advent speaks this word of comfort. God is here. God has a plan for healing and wholeness, for you and all of creation. God is powerful, mighty, able to bring this plan to completion AND God is tender, loving, and longing to gather you in for comfort. This God, who we know in the flesh in Jesus, is a God who cares profoundly for the poor, the outcast, the lonely, the sick, the stranger, the disenfranchised, the immigrant, the imprisoned, the forgotten, the disowned. This God, who we know in Jesus, loves justice. The end of both wealth and poverty. The leveling of excess so that everyone has enough. The banquet table where everyone has a seat and all are fed. The great house where all have a room and none have empty beds to spare. The beloved community where none are murdered for their skin or excluded for their love.

Let's not go back to the way things were before 2020, before the pandemic, before George Floyd, before the crisis that has revealed our sickness and the roots of our disease.

In our state of crisis and dis-ease, we have the possibility to turn back to God and live a new kind of life. To confess our complacency and participation in injustice and find healing as we learn a new kingdom kind of life. To turn to Jesus and journey his way of love.

Comfort and repentance are not disparate things. They are powerfully connected by this God who is both tender and mighty, who is both demanding and comforting, who is both just and merciful. Who, at the end of the day, settles for nothing less than the healing of all, of the entire heavens and earth.

This is who God is, what God has done, is doing and will do. What are we going to do about it?