

Advent 2

Date: 10.12. 2023

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark1:1-8

Title: Comfort and Peace

Introduction

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

²Speak 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.” (Isaiah 40:1,2)

I don't know about you but I certainly need the Comfort that God offers to God's people.

The context of these comforting words.

The Hebrew people were definitely in need of comfort at that time. This second section of Isaiah was written during the time of Exile in Babylon. A large segment of the population had been forcibly removed from Israel to Babylon, and they didn't know if they would ever return.

This whole section of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, is about comfort, it's known as the Book of Consolation. It's about assuring the people of God that God has not forgotten them, that God has not forsaken them that God will help them through this difficult time and lead them to a place of renewal as God's people.

For some, it seemed that God had been silent for generations, unwilling or unable to rise to the occasion. They were weary. Many had become disillusioned. They held that God was a false hope... a distraction from doing whatever you could to get comfortable, to hole up and hold out in whatever way you could. It's at this moment that at last, God speaks again.

Let's not be mistaken that the 'comfort, comfort' that God offers so tenderly to God's people was **not** a promise to make God's people comfortable. There is nothing comfortable about living in exile. Away from your homeland. I am sure millions of Palestinians feel that way today. Millions have been displaced from their birthplace.

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to the people in Jerusalem, in Palestine, in Ukraine, in Myanmar, in Afghanistan, in South Sudan, and all affected by Climate change.

Do you know who the first verse, Comfort O comfort my people, is directed at? I have to confess that I never thought about that question till I was reading the passage in my big Hebrew translation and there was a note about it.

Many scholars have come to believe God is talking to the Hebrew people themselves. They are to comfort one another, to be the presence of God to one another. Which puts a whole new twist on the reading, doesn't it?

It's about giving comfort as well as receiving it, and perhaps in giving we shall also receive.

What God offers instead is the comfort we find in getting ready.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord" says the prophet Isaiah.

Centuries later, by the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist would take up Isaiah's cry, sensing something urgent in it once again.

Neither Isaiah nor John the Baptist understood waiting on the Lord as an invitation to sit back and relax and become comfortable.

Again, there is a clear distinction between being comfortable and receiving comfort. Being comfortable involves the pursuit of self-interest, even seemingly well-meaning self-interest. We speak of things like "creature comforts."

Or when we are not well we think of "eating our comfort food."

We refer to a certain threshold of wealth (in which we can attain basic luxuries with relative ease) as "making a comfortable living." Tried-and-true methods, ideas, and even relationships are described as being "as comfortable as an old shoe."

These idioms represent values of familiarity and ease. They convey feelings of suspicion about newness and change.

Receiving comfort, on the other hand, is what God promises to those who navigates the wilderness. The wilderness is inherently a place of discomfort.

If you listen to John the Baptist in today's gospel, the way to a new future, to a new life, is always through the wilderness. There is no way around the wilderness. We can't avoid the wilderness. In scripture and literature, wilderness represents that which is unknown, feral, uncontrolled, and challenging. It evokes a sense of vulnerability and exposure.

But wilderness also implies growth, journey, and the possibility for a divine encounter. It was also a call to do nothing less than lower the mountains and raise the valleys, to make a highway in the desert for the Messiah, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. They wanted us out there with our bucket and our shovel. They understood that the very things that offer us true and lasting comfort has little to do with the things that make us comfortable.

In the Gospel of Mark, it echoes the passage from Isaiah, with its repetition of the verse *“to prepare the way of the Lord.”*

It echoes Isaiah, but we also see a more personal aspect of faith developing. The concept of individual repentance is central to this passage.

You have to wonder, why did it resonate so strongly with the people of that time? We need to remember they were an oppressed people, their country was controlled by the Romans, their faith was controlled by the priests. They were miserable. They couldn't change the rulers or the priests, but they could change themselves, the way they were living.

“So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁵ And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.” (Mark 1:4,5)

Some Christians dislike the word repentance. And so, they dislike the prayers of Confession! At its heart, repentance is about change, the word comes from the Greek ‘metanoia’, which means to change direction, to turn towards God. Repentance is a change of heart, that leads to a change in the direction of life.

So, John the Baptist's message of repentance fell on fertile ground. Repentance was at the heart of Jesus' message, change the way you live and change the world – bring about the kin-dom of God.

So the question that came to me as I reflected on this passage was, what message of repentance do we need today?

If someone were to preach repentance, the need to change our lives, change our direction and change our world, what would their message be today? Or who is already trying to preach repentance and are we listening?

I can think of two directions that we need to change –

One: Violence is not the way of peace. Violence begets more violence.

In Isaiah Chapter 2, “someday, someday, says the prophet, this is the future that awaits us, God’s future for us: *People from all over the world gathered together, all worshipping the one God; no more war between nations; swords beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.*

A different vision of the future. A bright future to hope for if we repent.

And second, we certainly need to change the way, we are doing things for the well-being of others, for the very well-being of the planet. We can’t continue to rape the earth and expect it to sustain us. We need to repent, to change direction if we don’t want to further damage the earth.

Change is being forced upon us this Advent, we can fight it or we can see it as an opportunity for repentance.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God”

Oppression abounded in John’s and Isaiah’s time; and it still does. There is a rise in anti-Semitism, and Islamic phobia in the world. White supremacy is again on the march. Racism was normalized then, it is now; polarization characterised religious and political relationships, the same applies today; the gap between the wealthy and poor continues to grow.

Bombs fall in Gaza, and thousands of children died. And Israeli children are kidnapped.

And, yet we live in hope on a new dawn, a day of justice, of the uplifting of the poor, and the liberation of the captives.

Isaiah 40 describes the theme of preparation, a characteristic of the Advent season. Something wild is about to happen, something that will change everything, and the way for God’s coming needs to be prepared, in the highways and byways and in our spiritual pathways.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God.”

The Christmas spirit is more than buying gifts; it is a transformed mind, changed heart, and caring hands.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God.”

The pathways need to be made straight –as we walk the road of repentance, changed lives and minds with Jesus as our companion. The “comfort, comfort” of which Isaiah speaks and the call to repentance from John the Baptist emerge straight out of the harshest realities of life in this world.

Seeking to be **comfortable** is what happens when we imagine that, in the end, the only possibility is that we belong to ourselves. It may well be harmless. But it’s also pointless.

By contrast, to be **comforted** is to remember that, in truth, we all belong to God. That we always have and always will.

Comfort is focused on the things that can never be taken away.

Instead of moving inward, comfort moves outward, seeking to love what God loves, and to disrupt anything that would seek to deny that love.

So when Isaiah and John the Baptist call us to “prepare the way of the Lord,” this is what they’re talking about. That’s what they want for us.

“Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God.”

And may we all know the comfort of God!