

The invitation to comfort
Menno Mennonite Church
Advent 2020 Year B Week 2
December 6, 2020

Purpose: To explore the prophetic invitation into the way of the kingdom.

Message: YHWH invites the people of God into a way of being that relies on the presence of God, even when that presence can be hard to perceive.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11 (Sermon Text); Mark 1:1-8 (Complementary)

Synopsis: The promise of God's coming is a both and. It comforts us as it allows us to perceive a world made new, and it challenges us to consider what, for us, that coming might mean. There is a difference between being comforted by the surety of the Lord and the reassurance that change, for us, may not be required.

These words come to God's people after a long intermission. There is a gap between first and second Isaiah (A common academic differentiation in the writing) right at chapter 40 which spans the 50 years of exile. Now that is waning, but that does not mean the circumstance has lost its power. God's comfort is in the covenantal love that will not, can not, end rather than a simplistic promise that everything will be alright. In that we are given a wholly different mode of being in and relying on God with us which is what we are truly waiting on.

[Comfort-discomfort isa 40_1-11 1272008.doc](#)

[Changing the Landscape AD2 Isa 40_1-11 12-4-2011.docx](#)

Pope Francis NYT Opinion: to come out of the pandemic better than we went in, we must let ourselves be touched by others pain.

Isaiah 40: 1-11 (Tanakh)

40 Comfort, oh comfort My people,
Says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
And declare to her

That her term of service is over,
That her iniquity is recompensed.

For she has received at the hand of the Lord
Double for all her sins.

³A voice rings out:

“Clear in the desert
A road for the Lord!
Level in the wilderness
A highway for our God!

⁴Let every valley be raised,
Every hill and mount made low.
Let the rugged ground become level
And the ridges become a plain.

⁵The Presence of the Lord shall appear,
And all flesh, as one, shall behold—

For YHWH has spoken.”

⁶A voice rings out: “Proclaim!”

Another asks, “What shall I proclaim?”

“All flesh is grass,
All its goodness like flowers of the field:
⁷Grass withers, flowers fade
When the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Indeed, humankind is but grass:

⁸Grass withers, flowers fade—

But the word of our God is always fulfilled!”

⁹Ascend a lofty mountain,
O herald of joy to Zion;

Raise your voice with power,
O herald of joy to Jerusalem—

Raise it, have no fear;
Announce to the cities of Judah:

Behold your God!

¹⁰Behold, the Lord God comes in might,

And God's arm wins triumph for Him;
See, YHWH's reward is with Him,
God's recompense before Him.

¹¹Like a shepherd YHWH pastures His flock:
He gathers the lambs in His arms

And carries them in His bosom;

Gently God drives the mother sheep.

We all have our traditions. That is what this whole season is about: coming into the familiar and celebrating, we would prefer it, the way things ought to be. When we step out of our traditions—those well-worn groves in the seasonal fabric of our world just feels right and proper to the way things ought to be. Because that's the point, most often, isn't it? To enjoy the mystique of the moment, both that which is genuinely present and artificially manufactured, and enjoy the familiarity of the seasonal moment. Some of the hardest things to change in the world are our traditions whether born over decades or the simplicity of "well, we did it this way LAST year." Because we have our way of doing and being, and we need to keep that the same no matter what. For me it was always the off-day Christmas that we would have following the annual Messiah sing. Being the only family away, Christmas proper required us trekking to Indiana. But the weekend before, we would sing together, help clean up from the performance, then head home to snacks and presents with the youngest (that's me—yea) opening first. The day would change, the time and all the rest, but that was the ritual come what may, at least until my brother and I began working in occupations where Christmas day, or December for that matter, is not exactly the most convenient time to take off work.

Most of the time, this is what we mean by comfort. To take heart in the familiar, the warm, the welcoming. We have our mac-and-cheese, our hot cocoa, favorite blanket and the right music and all is right with the world. It's that which we relax in to, seemingly without even trying. Of course, like water seeking its own level and other great and inviolate natural laws, human beings will, above all else, seek the path that is the most comfortable and least challenging when given the option. Call it Bryce's axiom of human behavior. If it makes us uncomfortable in the least we will go to great and extreme lengths to avoid it, especially when it comes to the sacred traditions of that which "we always have..." in tradition. Our traditions are what they are not because they are somehow fore-ordained as inalienable rights, but simply because it is what we expect of the world, especially when you are used to a world which with at least a reasonable amount of money and ability you can convince that you control. When we are fully in our element, there is little that can possess us to be disturbed or offer disruption to our present, less the aura be somehow broken.

That being the case, I think that there is some fundamental issues with this reading from Isaiah. As much as we love it, as I do, as much as it is the voice of the holiday as it is for so very many, it may come a little off key to come to understand this text in its fuller sense. Of

what is being said here, let alone to whom and why. And when we do, our comfort level is changed, but I think, I hope, for the better.

We read these words as we find them in our experience and out of our assumptions. That they are the words to the people of God waiting for the Messiah, waiting for Jesus. We might think that the prophet is speaking in a time and place of ease. But that is not the case. At this point in the story we are in a big hinge moment of the whole book. There is a point of inflection here where Isaiah goes in chapter 39 from directly counseling Hezekiah of the coming exile to Babylon to these words of comfort. Were this a movie we would have just gone through a whole bunch of wavy lines, some music, and a text that tells us “50 years later”. All that Isaiah has been predicting has come true and has been coming true for generations already. Jerusalem is a ruin, and the people of God have been dispossessed, displaced, and distanced from all that they know for all that time. God’s seemingly been on break and not talking to them. They have been in isolation, wondering, no doubt where God might be in all of this. This is why this text is so important and why the prophets of the New Testament foretelling of the coming Christ time and again quote this.

These are not words of comfort to the comfortable already; these are the reestablishment of communication after what must have seen a long and dark period of absence. And what comes of this—Comfort, comfort O my people; Speak peace to Jerusalem, for the time of punishment is over. These are the first drops of rain after a long drought and they are called to repentance not to ensure God’s forgiveness, but simply to be invited into what God is doing along the way. It is God who initiates the reconciliation. God’s voice even suggests that perhaps thing went further than intended along the way. It is God who recalls and reinvigorates the covenant for God’s own sake. The comfort being offered is not the comfort of your favorite flavor of ice cream and a hug at night; it is the comfort that even here, even now, God remains present and willing to come to God’s people to make a difference for them.

There is an episode on the 90’s sitcom and eternal syndication hit *Friends* where the on-again-off-again relationship of Ross and Rachel had hit a rough spot. They had stepped back from their relationship because it wasn’t living up to their expectations. Eventually they come back together only to have Ross reveal that another encounter had happened in the meantime. This betrayal of trust breaks them up again, and leaves Ross confused about the whole thing as he claims time and again that “We were on a break” in explaining it all.

We were on the break. It sounds familiar. It sounds like our relationship with God. Yet, there is no break from God's love. We might feel disconnected, isolated, abandoned, especially as we try to fit our discomfiting circumstances into the ways we take comfort in God and perhaps find that they no longer quite work right. But God still remains with us, and God will reveal all things and all ways in God's time. We know that patience is a virtue, but that does not mean it comes easily. It has to be planted, cultivated and nourished for it to grow and bear the weight of the world in which we live. The is true of us in our lives; it is true of us in our collective lives. These days have tested our patience deeply, and they will continue to do so. They have been uncomfortable and they will continue to be. We just want all of this to stop, all of the waiting to come to an end and be done with any of this. And the more tantalizingly close a real solution may seem, the less realistically patient we will and have become. Again, comfort will out every time. The people are given the imperative of comfort- that's what the Hebrew suggests. They are both commended to take comfort in God in the uncomfortable situation that they find themselves in as well as to become comfort—to take on the verb form and go about comforting the people of God, both the prophet being told to do this and the people themselves I think.

The comfort that God offers is not the status quo comfort of “because it has always been this way” but the far truer comfort—that God is engaged in the world, so much so that there is going to be no separation between the holy of the mountain and the lowest point of the valley. All will be filled with the glory of God. That might be comforting. It also might be disquieting, especially when what we are comfortable in and what God has in mind might not be the same thing entirely. Even as we wait for the end of our waiting, we can find both comfort in the promise of God's coming and challenge in its provocative meaning for us each even here, even now.

I came across this week in my digital wonderings an opinion piece from Pope Francis. There was a line in it that struck me. As he considered what it might mean to emerge from this time of challenge as a society, he suggests: *to come out of the pandemic better than we went in, we must let ourselves be touched by others pain.* As much as we think ourselves connected and can send virtual Facebook hugs across the ether there are many ways that we protect ourselves from the discomforts of others and the mini pandemics that seem to be on permanent display. We protect ourselves both because there is so much against which we are challenged with, he

suggests. We have gotten quite good at embracing our comforts. We have gotten good at refining and living in our traditions and through our ways of being. Sometime the way of the Lord is about knowing God with us not just when we are comfortable and familiar, and safe, but also the God with us in the challenging, the exposed, the frustrating, the interminable. God is with us and will remain with us, come what may. We are invited to take comfort in this. But never so much so that we forget the God with us also invites us to prepare the way of the Lord and address the profoundly uncomfortable, awkward truths as well.

“Prepare the way of the Lord” is a call to Advent, to the anticipation and preparation of waiting to reach the promised end of suffering and separation, difficulties and distance, burdens and brokenness to make way for the glory of Emmanuel. That is the end of Advent, the meaning and point of observing this season on the liturgical calendar. The call is to comfort and to encourage by proclaiming this good news. Isaiah heeded the command to “cry out!” John the Baptist did the same. We too are charged, amid our season of waiting, to remind, to reveal, and to reinforce this good news, “Here is your God!”

There is no break. The end. Come Lord Jesus, be with us, comfort us. But discomfort us that we might prepare your way even here. Amen