

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

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December 10, 2017

Here on the second Sunday in Advent, the prophet Isaiah gives us an important and helpful word. He gives us the word comfort. He gives it to us twice. That is a sign of the importance placed on this word. “Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” Israel has been through a hard time. Israel has experienced great sorrow. Their lives have been in turmoil, they have lost much, endured much, and suffered much. Now they hear from the prophet...yes, from the prophet...but more importantly, they hear from God, words of comfort. Comfort is powerful, and when we receive comfort, it can be life giving, and it can even be transforming.

We come across the word comfort again in the final chapter of Isaiah. The Lord says to his people, “I will extend peace to you like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted.” (Isaiah 66:12, 13) As with any metaphor it is not true in all situations, but for many the image of a mother comforting her child conveys the comfort God can bring. As a mother comforts her child, can you imagine a God who would kiss your boo boo, dry your tear, smooth your hair, hold you on her lap, whisper gentle words, sing a sweet lullaby, and bless you with a kiss?

How Israel must have needed to hear words of comfort. They had been invaded by Assyrians, invaded by Babylonians, enslaved, exiled, embarrassed, humbled, humiliated, hated, displaced, disgraced, and bitterly disappointed. At least once Israel had said about God, “The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me.” At least once Israel had said that about God. More than likely it had been a common refrain during the long years of sadness and suffering. But now God says, “Comfort, comfort my people.” Now God speaks tender words to Israel. “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; and you will be comforted.”

At least once, and undoubtedly time and time again as days stretched to years to decades of exile, Israel cried out, “The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” I say at least once, because those exact words are found in Isaiah 49:14. Isaiah 49 is a profound passage as Israel rightfully wrestles with their sense of abandonment. Listen to this heartfelt exchange between God and God’s precious children. Israel is called to rejoice.

“Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.” (Isaiah 49:13)

But Israel isn't ready to rejoice. Israel isn't ready to shout for joy. Israel is not ready to burst into song. Their hurt runs deep. They have not felt God's comfort or God's compassion. So instead of rejoicing and bursting into song, the only words Israel can muster are ones that speak of being abandoned and left alone. "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."

How is God going to respond to that? God has an answer, and it speaks of one whose heart is given to his people, whose love is steadfast, whose commitment is strong, whose deepest desire is wrap his children in his tender embrace.

Israel cries out, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." And God, their God, our God, our loving God, says, "Not so."

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15,16)

Comfort, comfort my people...for there is one who rules the heavens in majesty, power, and glory, but this one is not distant, and his desire is not to destroy. This one we call our God has come to bring comfort. "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; and you will be comforted." If you have doubts, if you need evidence, God says, "Come a little closer, and let me show you my hands. Your name is written on the palms of my hands."

To convey the comfort God brings, we are presented in Isaiah with another image to accompany the mother who comforts her child. Our passage this morning also offers us the figure of a shepherd. It is found in the last verse we read this morning, Isaiah 40:11. Consider the comfort that is found in these words. "The Lord tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." God comes as a shepherd who tends, who gathers in his arms the little lambs, carrying them close to his heart, and gently leads those that have young. We don't have to make our own way in the world. We have a shepherd who watches over us, nurtures us, holds us close, and gently leads us along.

I wonder how many times Israel found comfort in saying a prayer that first came to a young boy out watching his flock of sheep as they grazed the hills near Bethlehem. I wonder how many of us have been comforted by the prayer that begins...

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." What comfort it is to know we have a shepherd who supplies our every want, who makes us to lie down in green pastures, who leads us beside still waters, restoring our souls, and who leads us in paths of righteousness. There is deep comfort in these promises.

This Psalm is attributed to David, who was not only the great king of Israel. As a young boy he was a shepherd. When the young shepherd boy pleaded for the chance to go head to head with Goliath, the giant who stood head and shoulders above little David, King Saul tried to talk him out of it. “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.” What King Saul did not understand is that in his role as shepherd, David had been tested for battle. David explains, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued it from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.”

There is great comfort in knowing the shepherd is there to protect his flock. When Israel prayed the psalm about the shepherd, they knew the part that said, “Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” David, even as a youth, used his rod and staff to protect his sheep against beasts of prey. So it is that Israel claimed the promise that God, their shepherd, was there to protect them. It is in this very psalm about the shepherd that Israel would speak the words of deepest faith, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. I will give you my comfort as a mother comforts her child. I will give you my comfort as the shepherd who provides and nurtures and blesses you, and as the shepherd who guards and watches and protects you.

The depth of comfort God brings comes to life as we realize God, the comforting mother and the protecting shepherd is the Sovereign Lord of all creation. This God is able to redeem the past, a past that has included the sins of a people whose history records them turning from God in a pattern where they rebelled against and rejected God. Their past also included unexplained suffering. These are a people who knew the story of Job. If they knew the 23rd Psalm about the shepherd, you better believe they knew the 22nd Psalm and the heart wrenching cry of, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” There is great mystery in being the people of God. There is so much that is never explained. But hear this: As Israel emerged from the deep distress of the exile God comforts them by saying, “Your hard service has been completed. Your sin has been paid for.” Israel, you came through this season of despair, and I’ve covered whatever needed to be covered. The old is gone. I’m doing something new. Your past has served a purpose. It is all a part of a salvation history that gives witness to a people who are chosen and loved by God. From the despair of devastating disappointments to the exultation of Exodus and right up to the unbelievable sound of laughter as exiles celebrate a joyful homecoming, God has been shaping a people who can sing this eternal song of praise, “Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever.”

With a past that has been paid for, covered completely by God, the promise of something new rises out of the ashes. “A voice of one calling: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” God is up to something new, as only God can be. In the wilderness, or the desert, a place of lost hopes and crushed dreams, God is preparing a way. What seems like a dead end, with God becomes a fresh start. God’s purposes are revealed in words that spark the imagination of a people who have witnessed the consequences of greed and experienced the effects of oppression. God is going to take the crooked paths that humans use to destroy and he is making a straight path. Valleys and mountains demonstrate the great inequality and injustice that far too often marks human relationships and mars the image of God that is imprinted on every single human life. Get ready, the valleys will be raised up and the mountains brought low.

“Comfort, comfort my people.” You cannot raise expectations any higher than the prophet Isaiah raises expectations. Mountains brought low, valleys raised up, wolves lying down with lambs, swords being turned into plowshares, no one harming or destroying anything...this is the good news that that brings great joy in Isaiah 40. The way is being prepared in the wilderness, in the desert, for God himself to enter the scene in a new and dramatic way: “You who bring good news, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the people of Israel, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.”

Here on the second Sunday in Advent, the prophet Isaiah gives us an important and helpful word. He gives us the word comfort. What might it look like for God to be with us? The prophet says, “Here is your God!” What might it look like for God to be with us, this God who comforts us like a mother comforts her child, who shepherds us like only a good shepherd could do, both blessing and protecting us, and who comes with power, with a mighty arm”? What might it look like for that type of God to come and be with us?

When God sent a messenger into the wilderness, the one who is calling out, “Prepare the way for the Lord”, when God sent John the Baptist, and the Baptist said, “One is coming after me, he is more powerful than me...” the stage is set for God to come and be with us. “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Just as Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” Mark 1:9-11

Dear friends, here is our Comforter. Here is our Lord. Here is our Savior. Indeed, here is our God. Here is Jesus. Today may we find our comfort in him, for he is Emmanuel. In him, God truly is with us.