

## **“Courage, Friends, Courage!”**

### **Sermon on the Second Sunday in Advent, 12/6/2020, Dunn's Corners**

Dear Friends,

Those of you who were present at the service two weeks ago will remember: I work as a hospital chaplain at a large Harvard teaching hospital in Boston. In my native tongue German, the term for chaplains, or as we call ourselves nowadays, spiritual care providers, is “*Seelsorger*,” Caretaker of Souls. I love that term, as I think that describes exactly what we try to do in the hospital: we cannot care for the bodies of our patients, that's what doctors do, but we care for the souls of the sick people in the hospital, the people that are downcast, fearful, the folks that feel abandoned by their loved ones and sometimes by God.

The powerful biblical text that our lectionary recommends for today, is a soul-caring text! It is a text that wants to encourage us and give us hope! It is one of the most jubilant and encouraging texts we have in the Bible. In hymnal form it calls out: “*Comfort, comfort my people! Speak tenderly to them! Tell them that the time of hardship is about to end!*”

The people the original text was directed to were the people of Israel, some 2500 years ago. And they were downcast, hopeless and homeless: Israel had been overrun by the powerful army of Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed; the beloved temple torn down and leveled to the ground. The people of Israel were scattered over the world, taken prisoners and exiled. We hear that the men that were able to work were taken as slave labor to Babylon with their families. And there, by the rivers of Babylon, far away from home they were crying! They were desperate, they were resigned and they had lost all hope.

And then this prophet came along, Isaiah, who himself lived in the Babylonian Exile. And he sang this song to them. He told his people, that God wanted him, the prophet, to comfort his people, to tell them that the tide was changing, that Babylon was about to fall and that the people of Israel were going to be able to go back home, home to Israel, but more importantly, back to an undisturbed relationship and connection with their God.

Whatever stood between them and God, hills, or valleys, rough places and obstacles were going to be cleared out and the access to God, that had been cut off in exile, would be restored once again.

And God, says the prophet, will tend to his people like a shepherd takes care of his flock; God will hold us in his arms as if we were lambs “*and carries us close to his heart*” and gently will lead his people back to where they are safe and at home!

**God, dear friends is described as a tender and caretaking God;** We are reminded that God is a loving, nurturing and supportive God. Imagine this incredible statement: God carries each and every one of us close to his heart! I wonder what that means to you? I wonder what thoughts and what feelings that evokes in you? I wonder if you can imagine yourself being a vulnerable, shaking lamb in the powerful arms of a loving shepherd?

You and I, citizens of Rhode Island, people of Westerly and other communities in the area are of course not exiled, like the people of Israel, Isaiah talks to: Most of us were not carried away as slaves; most of us were not taken

prisoners and most of us don't find ourselves in a foreign country, many thousands of miles away from home, weeping.

There are of course our immigrants, who left violent lives in Central America and who are looking for a new beginning and a life of freedom in the US. There are fugitives from war-zones like Syria, or Afghanistan, or disaster zones. But most of us, I imagine, live here because we want to be living here. We chose this state, we chose the town we live in.

And yet, I can't help thinking that the pandemic we are all living in, the COVID 19 crisis we have been challenged with for 8 months now, is comparable to an Exile. We did not choose this! We did not want this. We do not like this! This virus has caused incredible damage in this country and throughout the world. Two weeks ago the number of deaths caused by COVID 19 in our country reached the staggering number of 250,000 people! We have been locked into our own houses. Our children have not been able and many still can't go to school! We can't go out easily! We can't have our family gatherings as usual; Thanksgiving, I imagine was different this year for all of us! Christmas, I imagine, will be different for all of us! We can't invite our friends as we used to! We have to be careful when we go shopping. We can't or couldn't go to the gym, the hairdresser, even the doctor! So many of us would like this awful pandemic be over and done with! In some ways we are sitting by the waters of Babylon and waiting for this challenging time to pass!

I wonder: How is it for *you* in your current challenging and exhausting situation, dear friends, to hear the prophet Isaiah's words? "**Comfort, comfort my people!**" Tell them that **I myself, the creator and sustainer of heaven and**

**earth, will take you to a place where you will be safe! I will carry you on my arms and close to my heart, so that nothing happens to you!**

What if we let ourselves be comforted in that way? What if we believed that we are not only in good hands, but in the best, most caring, most powerful hands there are?!

If you are anything like me you will know how easy it is to lose sight of God's amazing promises and unbelievable caring. If you are anything like me then you will find it easy to think that *we* have to do it all, that *we* have to bring about the change we are waiting for. That it is OUR responsibility to carry the burden! That we have to fight and struggle and push and heave! And of course: We can't be passive! And we need what we can do, we need to do our part.

However: What if we are not only allowed, but actually invited to trust God? What if we are all sitting in our little rowing boat, rowing through our life with great efforts - while God is carrying us where we need to be and where we need to go with a gentle and powerful current that just takes our boat?

I visited a **patient** a few months ago, who embodied this trust in a way that I found to be awe-inspiring. He was 51 years old, had advanced cancer and was at a point where his cancer had metastasized throughout his body. This patient was of Mexican descent, but had lived in this country for 30 years and built his life here. He had been brought up Catholic and was deeply religious, so he wanted to speak to a chaplain. When I visited this gentleman he told me, that he wanted to live, that he had many more plans for his life and that it made him sad that he would not be able to achieve many of his goals. But, he said, while I don't understand why this

is happening to me, I trust that God is holding me in his hands. I know this is what needs to happen and that God will be there with me all the way. He emanated such peace when he said this and had this serene and gentle look on his face when he spoke with me. He repeated a version of this narrative every time I visited him over the five or six weeks I knew him: he smiled at me and told me that God was holding him firmly throughout this journey. He wanted me to pray with him, and he always wanted me to thank God for his life and the blessings he had received. To me this is a living example of what the prophet is speaking about when she says that God “*gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.*”

How, dear friends would it look like for *you* to be comforted? What would have to happen that YOU felt you were carried close to God's heart? What would the prophet have to tell you so you would believe that change is in the air?

There is one more topic I want to lift up from this text: In verse 6 the text says that human beings are like grass and that all our glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. I find this idea to be comforting: We know from our practical experience how nothing in this world really is permanent. Summer doesn't stay, fall doesn't stay, we are moving into winter and winter also won't stay. Our bodies change, our children and grandchildren grow up, our presidents come and go. There is a fundamental impermanence in this world, we can't hold onto things or people. But in all the impermanence, the prophet tells us, the word of our God stands forever, God is permanent, solid, and loyal, like a rock around which our lives flow like a river. I find that thought comforting by itself: Through all of our crises, through our ups and downs, before COVID, during COVID and when COVID will be over one day, God was there, God is there, God will be there, trustworthy and reliable,

looking out for us, caring for us and carrying each and every one of us close, very close to his heart! May you all be comforted and cared for deeply by our loving and faithful God. May you all be well and content! May your hearts be at peace in these turbulent times! Amen