

Comfort
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Isaiah 40:1-11 and Mark 1:1-8

I could have called this sermon, “Looking for Comfort in All the Wrong Places.” Somebody else suggested a title for this week: “Ready or Not, Here I Come.” Perhaps it could be called, “Making a Straight Way through the Wilderness.” Or even “Roadbuilding 101.” All of those titles suggest more work, more activity, perhaps more emotion, than the title I selected, which is “Comfort.”

Comfort, it’s a good word, don’t you think? When you hear ‘comfort,’ what do you think of? I must admit, I think of sitting in my jammies on my couch, with a nice cup of coffee or tea and a good book, probably an afghan thrown across my lap. Physical comfortableness is what I think of first. Secondly, I might think of comforting someone who is weeping or distressed in some way. I might think of picking up a baby who is crying and holding it, cooing to it and patting its back. Probably neither of those images is what Isaiah had in mind, although the second one might be closer than the first. I never think of Southern Comfort, but you might!

Israel was yearning for comfort. Israel had been unfaithful to God, and had been languishing in exile in Babylon. At least some part of the leaders of Israel had been exiled, and Isaiah was writing from their perspective. The Israelites knew they were being punished for their sins, for failing to follow God first, for failing to place God first in their lives. And now, here in Chapter 40, God announced, through the prophet, that their penalty has been paid. Although God owed them nothing else, God sent a prophet to speak these words. “Comfort, Comfort, O my people.”

This chapter is the recognized beginning of the second section of Isaiah, sometimes called Second Isaiah or Deutero—Isaiah. This section of Isaiah takes place some 200 years after most of the first 39 chapters when the empire Israel was in fear of was not Babylon, but rather Assyria. Still the overarching message in First and Second Isaiah is that Israel has been unfaithful. Isaiah continued to proclaim that their loyalty should

not lie with those gods and the kings who worship them, but rather with YHWH, the God who delivered the Israelites from slavery and gave them the land of Israel.

Comfort - did the word mean the same thing for Isaiah as for us? What must the reaction of Isaiah's hearers have been when they first heard these words? "Comfort" probably was not a reference to comfortableness, the way I thought about it earlier, but more likely Isaiah was using comfort to mean "to strengthen or to console."

We make a mistake if we think the message of the Scriptures this Advent season is about comfortableness. We make a mistake if we think the message can be wrapped up and delivered in a Hallmark moment or a cozy reading of "The Night before Christmas." Although God said that Isaiah was to speak tenderly to Jerusalem, giving her a word of hope that does not mean that Israel's hard work had ended. God would be the shepherd who tenderly cared for God's lambs. God was indeed with Israel and with us, caring for us, forgiving us and watching over us. But there was work to do.

Both Isaiah and John the Baptist warn about mistaking God's comfort for comfortableness. Both prophets came to say that God is with us, but that there is work to be done. There will be hard service required of those who wish to trust in God's presence, in Emmanuel.

Isaiah spoke of hard service - What is the hard service that he is referring to? And how was it to be completed? What did that mean in the experience of Jerusalem, and what does it mean for us and our experiences?

John the Baptist spoke of clearing the road for the one who will be coming, the One who is bringing the Holy Spirit with which to baptize people. John the Baptist spoke of repentance and making the roadway straight.

Highway building is hard work. I don't know if you watched any of the highway construction as it went on this summer, but I did. One place in particular that I watched was by the Okemos exit to I96. Did you see that? They built their own little concrete plant right there beside the road. They installed equipment, brought

lots of sand and gravel, and lots of people to repair the highway and make it less bumpy. Road building takes a lot of time and large pieces of equipment today. Think about the work that must have been done in Isaiah's or John the Baptist's time. It would have taken huge numbers of people and animals in addition to the equipment they had for hauling and splitting stone. The Romans were avid road builders, we can still see some of their roads today. Kings in Isaiah's time demanded smooth roadways for their processions as well. One does not simply fill the valleys, smooth the rough places and straighten the curves with a few friends on a Saturday afternoon. This would have required mammoth commitments of manpower and time. This might even require the mighty arm of God to assist.

Isaiah's words of comfort were spoken to a people in exile; a people who had given up hope of returning to their home. A people who felt tried and convicted of their sinfulness, and who lived in a country far from their home. But were they longing for home or were they happy as captives in the land far from God? This text assumes that those addressed by the prophet live in a far land. We need to consider how it relates to us. How is it that we dwell at a distance from God?

Advent gives us the opportunity each year to consider the detours, barriers and obstacles that keep us from a full relationship with God. It offers us an opportunity to prepare our hearts, and straighten the pathways to God. Many of us have taken a circuitous route to God over the course of our lives. After I was a faithful church goer in high school, going by myself not with my family, I stopped attending church or holding myself accountable to God for a number of years. Fortunately, God will pursue us and eventually I returned to God's fold. But for many of us, for one reason or another, the straight path does not seem attractive. Isaiah and John the Baptist come to remind us that we can straighten out the pathways, we can repent, and we are loved by God. We can turn again to God's ways. We can work to make the bumpy roads of injustice, hunger and poverty smoother. We can strive to straighten out the curves and blind alleys of injustice, and intolerance that is still rampant in our lives. We can labor to bring down the mountains that separate us from people of other cultures, races and religions.

Even though Advent gives us the opportunity to turn our hearts to God, Advent also comes with its own detours and temptations. What are the detours? There is, first of all, the commercialism of this season. The saving power of God's love in Jesus' birth can certainly get lost in the shuffle of holiday tunes, shopping, and blinking lights. That's one detour. The second detour is the way in which we often think of Jesus' birth. We think of Jesus, the baby, come on a starry night with the angels singing, but many never think of Jesus the man who also quoted Isaiah in his preaching when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives ... [and] to set at liberty those who are oppressed..."(Luke 4:18) The man who came to offer himself for our salvation. These detours from Advent happen when we do not take the time it allows us to consider what Jesus' coming means for our lives – both his birth and his promised second coming.

The tragedy of Advent happens when we do not take the texts to heart and apply them to our own lives; when we do not listen to the prophets that God sends to us. We are those who need to level out the paths of rampant commercialism, we are the ones who need to consider that we have tried to keep Jesus contained in the manger or in our lives in a manageable way. We have taken detours, gone down blind alleys and forgotten that our God is there with us, waiting for us to turn our hearts back to God. We often think, like the Israelites who were in Babylonian exile, that nothing will change. We often think, like the Israelites of the gospel writer Mark's age that the empire we know – in their case the Roman empire, in ours the United States and the economic empire of capitalism – will be the dominant empire forever. We often forget to look for the signs of God's kingdom. God's empire, coming – whether in the words of God's prophets, in a manger in Bethlehem, or in the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

"In 1863 the Commissioner of Patents sent his resignation to President Lincoln citing his conviction that everything exciting had been invented and patented, and there was nothing else for him to do but preserve the past. That is the tragedy when people of faith limit what God has done to the pages of a Bible or the places of first century Palestine and deny the work of the Holy Spirit. God not only came, but God comes! The

meaning of Advent is opening ourselves anew to make room for God in our lives now. Then as we prepare the way, we point to the One who goes before us.”¹ The long expected One will baptize with the Holy Spirit. With that baptism will come repentance, comfort and a radically new world. Amen.

¹ Nuggets from Lindy, Advent 2B “Illustration,” Elton Richards, Accessed online at www.textweek.com.