

Consolation

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

During an adult Sunday school class (back when we actually met face-to-face), we hit upon a hard passage. After the group grappled with it for a while, one person said, “We can’t get our heads around how those people thought.” I agreed. In part. “Those people” were the Hebrews of Old Testament times. Their language lacked past, present and future tenses as we use them. They thought the center of thinking and emotion was the gut. They had little experience of freedom from oppression and no conception of the value of the individual as over against the collective. They spent more time worrying about performing the correct animal sacrifice in order to appease God than they did worrying about any of the modern obsessions: What should I wear today? How should I invest my money? What will I do in retirement?

Yet we do share our humanity with the ancient Hebrews. Like them, we need food, shelter, meaning and love. With care we can use their scriptures to guide us in our walk with God, who is the same God they worshiped. Our passage from Isaiah 40 marks the start of a dramatic turn. The vocabulary and theology of the first thirty-nine chapters differ so markedly from the next twenty-six scholars call our part II Isaiah. This part of Isaiah was not written for at least 160 years after the death of the actual prophet Isaiah. We know this because scholarship has established this section of the book appeared only after the fall of the Babylonian Empire. And we know II Isaiah

wrote his prophecy to console the people of Israel.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,” opens Isaiah 40. Speak tenderly, the Lord instructs the prophet. Promise that warfare has ended and sin has been pardoned. The prophet hears a voice crying for the people to lay a straight, level highway through the desert. The glory of the Lord is coming. Smooth the way. For, “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him...He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather his lambs in his arms...” As so often happens, this prophecy operates on two levels: the physical present and the cosmic future.

The physical present of this prophecy applied to that fall of Babylon. For centuries the Children of Israel had suffered. Assyria and Babylon had steamrolled tiny Israel and Judah. Jerusalem was emptied, the Temple razed. Young women and able-bodied men were taken to foreign lands as slaves. The elderly and children were left to rot. But the Persians, a new power from the steppes of southern Asia, had appeared in the Middle East. They utterly defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus, their Emperor, had decreed the Jewish slaves could go home and rebuild. They could rebuild their cities and their temple. They could rebuild their lives.

II Isaiah heard God's Spirit labeling these geopolitical events as God's work. The Children of Israel had earned their suffering. Their sins of old against God had demanded repayment to God. Now, they have paid double. And God intends to restore them as the Chosen People in the Promised Land. It is all very specific, so

specific we have in hand Persian records that establish the exact date on which the Persians achieved final victory over the Babylonians (October 29, 539 B.C. for those keeping score at home.) But that is only the physical present, the first level on which this prophecy operates.

The prophecy also stands as a prediction of the work of God to be accomplished in the cosmic future. Mark understood this. Always in a hurry to get to his point, he tells us nothing about Jesus' birth or boyhood. Instead, Mark dives straight in with a quote of Isaiah 40. (Actually, Mark combines this with a prophecy from Malachi, incorrectly calling it all Isaiah, but we can forgive him. He *is* in a hurry to get on with it.) Mark understands the messenger sent by God not to be Jesus, but John the Baptist. Apparently many people found this wild and crazy Baptizer thrilling, for, “there went out to him all the county of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem.”

John is more than a carnival sideshow pulling into some benighted small town on a train. He baptizes for forgiveness of sins. Still, he makes it clear he is only the warm-up act. “After me comes one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” (Recall that feet were considered disgusting in that culture and you get a better idea of just how much “less-than” John sees himself in comparison to Jesus.) No, John says, he baptizes by scooping water out of the River Jordan. The One who comes will baptize with the Holy Spirit. The glory of the Lord is about to burst in upon them. The promised salvation will arrive. The blessings of God's covenant will be realized in time and space. Hallelujah!

This message has brought consolation to God's people for more than 2,400 years. From Isaiah to Mark to John the Baptist and eventually to Jesus, the comfort it offers remains the same. Find your consolation in God. God has already decisively acted in history to set in motion the chain of events that will inevitably culminate in the people of God being gathered into his arms like lambs protected from all evil. But in the meanwhile, as we await this consummation, can we find our consolation in God?

A certain pattern of conversation has emerged in 2020. When we meet, whether on the phone, on computer or even in person, the initial query, "How are you?" has taken on new force. Now we really want to know how others are. Now we really want to tell them how we are. Back in the early days of the pandemic, in March, April and May, we were fine, just fine. No, we have all the food and toilet paper we need. Thanks for asking. We're not going TOO crazy. The kids don't like school on a screen. But it's not forever.

The conversation evolved with the coming of summer. School ended. People could go to the parks, pick berries. A few businesses reopened. Businesses figured out how to operate. So we were still fine, just fine. Nobody even asked about toilet paper any more. The weather was great and we got out into it. The church decided to restart in-person worship and that helped. Some. Everybody wondered what would happen when we went back inside, at school and elsewhere. But it's not forever.

We rode that wave into the fall. But then threats appeared on the horizon,

advancing like the dust of foreign armies coming to lay siege to our way of life. And our conversation evolved again. We are no longer fine. We are tired, concerned, counting days passed since potential exposures and days to come before planned travel and family gatherings. The days shortened and we came back inside. Schools closed their doors to physical instruction. It's starting to feel like forever.

To all of which speaks the word of the Lord: Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. While what we have faced—and yet face with record infection numbers and rising death tolls—is serious and frightening, humanity has faced greater threats. The children of Israel endured total defeat, exile into slavery and starvation on the land for those left behind. Between 1629-1631 the Great Plague of Milan killed nearly one quarter of all Italians. Not so many generations ago our own nation endured the Great Depression, then the rise of fascism and total war. We say we believe in the power of the Word of God. Now is the time to test that faith.

We say we believe that Christ brings comfort and hope. Turn to Him to receive them. Speak of Him that others might do the same. I always enjoy speaking to our older members. They have that perspective and that sense of pacing themselves through life that come from experience. One older woman in this congregation never fails to lift my spirits. She has lost family members. She has lost part of her physical senses, part of her ability to perceive the world around her. Yet her faith in Jesus remains rock solid. And she draws from it intentionally not only to reassure herself, but to encourage others. Others like me, her pastor.

With her permission I want to share something she recently told me. We started with, "How are you?" I said I'm okay, but getting tired of not touching anybody. I'm weary of the arguments over the election and the right way to social distance. To which she replied, "Do you know, I had the most wonderful thing happen this morning when I was praying for you. I felt peace come over me. It reassured me that you really are with Jesus. He's supporting you in your important work. Isn't that nice?"

Yes, it is. She is praying for me. And she knows that God is carrying me. Jesus really does bring comfort and hope. Believe it. Reach for it. Offer it to one another. There could be no greater gift to give this Advent and Christmas.