

Living Faith Lutheran Church – Advent 2, 2020 (Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

What comes to mind when you hear that word “Comfort”? For me, it’s a welcome word in these times of Covid 19 and the general stress of a world gone a bit wonky, to say the least.

Comfort?

- A cup of hot chocolate, a nice snack, a comfy chair as I watch an episode of The Crown.
- Hearing about the Covid Vaccine and imaging the comfort of being with family and friends.
- About 45 days left in Trump’s reign.

You have your own thoughts, I know. But I’m sure you’ll concur that word ‘comfort’ is a most agreeable word indeed!

But try to leave your “comfort zone” for a moment, and imagine yourself in Babylon about 540 BC. You’ve been in Exile almost 40 years, resigned to your fate, and then this Prophet we now call the 2nd Isaiah, stands up in the city square and pronounces upon you the Comfort of God.

Babylon has not been such a bad place, as conquering Empires go. The Jews were given considerable freedom to worship, go into business, get married and generally be well-treated.

But it’s still exile and you’re in despair. Hearts are heavy. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

These are the Covenant people; God’s chosen, liberated, brought through the wilderness, given the law and the land – and all was squandered, all was lost. Yes, some Scholars were busy writing a revised history of Israel and also collected the songs of the people, their proverbs and wisdom. But for what purpose? Who’s paying attention? All we feel is God’s absence and anger.

Yet somehow this day is different – not punishment, but promise; not judgment but forgiveness.

Who is this guy?

Of all the prophetic works of the Hebrew Bible, I am awed by the insight, poetry and vision of this prophet to whom we accredit Chapters 40-66 of the Prophetic Book we simply call Isaiah.

God is acting in a new way – through the **servant** who sing's his songs.

And what we must hear is this: **God works within history** – not above or beyond historical events. We cannot separate faith and politics even if we wish we could. But now God begins to work from the bottom up – from the perspective of the servant.

This is a new day.

So, here I am in my chair with my cuppa, hoping to hear what else God is going to do for my comfort. I think I'm on a roll!

Whoops, got a little ahead of myself. God will do the heavy lifting, but I will need to get off my chair, it seems.

1. A Voice – a Voice shouting: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. It is a summons to Creation itself – flatten the curve! On this road through the desert, the glory of God will be revealed. A new Exodus is being prepared!
2. A voice says, CRY OUT. And Isaiah says "What shall I cry?" I believe Martin Luther translated this "What shall I preach?" which captures the meaning better.

A sermon with a bit of a warning: Don't get ahead of yourselves! Remember who God is and who you is (pardon the grammar!)

We are like grass, like the flower of the field – the grass withers, the flower fades. Alas! But the Word of our God will stand forever.

3. Shout some more! But this time it is Zion, Jerusalem herself with a new declaration: BEHOLD YOUR GOD! It gives you a shiver of fear and hope at the same time.

And all God's people say, WOW!

Now, I am already out of my chair, packed my lunch and ready for the hike. This is going to be amazing. But now what?

Oh, Comfort again . . . my old friend is back. Our mighty God who raises the valleys and flattens the mountains, who proclaims a new Exodus - now he is like a shepherd . . . what's going on?

He will feed his flock like a shepherd

He will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Comfort . . .

This is the prophetic imagination at its faithful perfection.

A new Covenant promise; a new Exodus; a new journey through the wilderness; a new joy in the holy city – yet all with the gentle hands of a shepherd holding a lamb.

Our attention to the Deutero-Isaiah will also lead us to appreciate John the Baptist in a new way. Mark gives us just a hint of John's character which is fleshed out more fully in the other Gospels.

But we have this general feeling that should he show up on Sunday morning, he would scare the life out of us.

Imagine John's Christmas Card: *From our house to your house at Christmas: "Greetings, you brood of vipers!"* Maybe not a Coutts-Hallmark best-seller.

John's clothing, for want of a better word, were not Eddie Bauer's top line. And his diet would not replace the preferred Mediterranean fare.

We don't doubt his vigor or his courage. He reminded people of Elijah, after all. But let's think this way:

John left the intrigue and chaos of Israel and Roman rule. He fled to the wilderness where he became an ascetic. He fasted and prayed and listened – and endured. He sought a voice, just as Elijah once did in his cave when all the energy of life and faith had drained out of him.

And then God spoke. BEHOLD YOUR GOD!

Faithful John did what he was told.

He knew the writings of this Isaiah. From the wilderness he cried, "Prepare the way of the Lord". For John this preparation would be Baptism - a rite the Jews usually reserved for proselytes, for Gentiles entering the faith of Israel. It was like the people were in Exile again, they had to be revived, freed, encouraged, comforted – brought home.

Repentance: How that word has been vandalized by judgemental preachers. It can be a hard word, of course, but it is also a comforting invitation to turn around, do a 180, leave the past, leave the confusion, leave the anguish, leave your unfaithful ways and prepare for a new day.

A new day – a new Revelation of God’s saving love, a new reign of peace. A new baptism with the Holy Spirit.

As followers of Jesus we are called to live a paradox:

In a world of strife, waste, hatred and violence – a world that perplexes us to no end, we are invited to take Comfort, relax a little, gain a new perspective. This is God’s world and God has come, God is coming in Jesus Christ. God will provide.

Drop the anxiety, loosen your defences, uncurl your fists, take a deep breath – we are loved, known, safe, at peace. Do not worry, do not be afraid.

But we are also summoned. The cry goes out – **prepare the way!**

The sermon is preached: yes we are like grass or flowers of a season – but we are God’s creatures and God loves us and is freeing us.

The Church cries out: **Here is your God!**

And some days, just when we’ve about had it, a shepherd comes to lift us to his breast.

We are comforted! Now we can comfort others.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!