

Sermon for December 6th, 2020
 2nd Sunday in Advent (Year B)
 Sermon Texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11 and Mark 1: 1-8
 Sermon Title: “*Comfort*”

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Holy One, we are confident that you are coming, bringing light into a dark world making all things new again. Strengthen us as we wait, keep our hope bright, and help us imagine the world as you do. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Prepare us, O Lord, by the coming of your Holy Spirit, that in this season of Advent we might hear your Word and prepare our hearts for the Christ child. Amen.

Several years ago, the story of Pam Heise who lives in Newport News appeared in the Daily Progress. Pam wanted to put the Christ back into Christmas, so she went to a store that specialized in Christmas yard art and bought a plastic manger and a plastic baby Jesus to put in her front yard. It was not the inflatable kind of yard art that is so popular these days, but rather a manger and a baby Jesus of hard grey plastic, so from a distance you might think that you were actually looking a stone carving of the crèche. One December morning, Pam walked out of her house and down to the curb to pick up her newspaper. When she turned around, she saw that the manger was filled with water from the hard rain the night before, but there was no baby Jesus. The baby Jesus had been stolen.

Indignant, Pam wrote an editorial to the local newspaper. The missing baby Jesus was probably the topic of all her entire holiday conversation. The next Christmas Pam decided not to replace the baby Jesus. What was the point after all? Through her experience the past year, Pam might have concluded that the world was not ready for Jesus. But then one December morning, Pam walked to the curb to retrieve her paper and nearly tripped over something grey wrapped in a dish- towel. It was the baby Jesus. The baby Jesus, with a note attached: *“I found the baby Jesus lying face down in your manger in a puddle of water. Perhaps you should take better care of your baby Jesus.”*

Taking better care of the baby Jesus means something specific for Christians. It means hearing the promises that were made to the community of faith once again and then to hold them close to our hearts during this season. These promises of God’s faithfulness to God’s covenant are heard in the ancient words of Isaiah. *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”* The Israelites have been living in exile in Babylon for over forty years. The prophet announces that the end of their exile is imminent. The word he speaks from God is one of deliverance. To those whose ears are not tuned to this divine doxology, the message is ridiculous, as is the claim that the Christ Child was born in a manger.

We are surrounded by other gods that claim our time, our attention, and our resources. The world squabbles over the earth’s resources and wages wars over them, robbing many of their lives and dignity. Our lack of stewardship of God’s good creation threatens our

environment. Even among religious communities, we pit our understanding of God against one another, leaving fragile believers both cynical and abandoned. How can Isaiah promise that *“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken?”*

Poetry has been described as the best words in their best order. Sometimes it is only poetry that can speak to a particular situation, which is why we often hear poetry read at funerals, weddings, inaugurations, and graduations. That’s probably why we hear Isaiah’s beautiful poetry so often during Advent because its style and message resonate so clearly in our hearts.

There are a multitude of voices in Isaiah’s text. It’s almost as if the heavenly council, the prophets and messengers whom God sends, and God are having Zoom call. First, we hear the voice of assurance: *“Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the lord’s hand double for all her sins.”*

Then a second voice: *“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”* What does that mean? Preparing the way of the Lord? Making straight in the desert a highway for our God?

In our Advent study group, we are reading Dicken’s novella *“A Christmas Carol.”* Jacob Marley was Ebenezer Scrooge’s business partner, who had been dead for seven years. On Christmas Eve, his ghost appears in Scrooge’s dreary and cheerless bedroom. Marley’s belt is wound around his waist, and is comprised of cash boxes, keys, padlocks, legers, and heavy purses filled with money. Marley’s ghost warns Scrooge that after death, Scrooge’s fate will be worse than Marley’s. Scrooge will walk the earth eternally, burdened with chains, seeing the misery of others, which he could have alleviated during his lifetime, but which he is now powerless to change. You know the rest of the story. Ebenezer Scrooge undergoes a profound experience of redemption on the Eve of Christmas.

Preparing the way of the Lord and making straight in the desert a highway for our God has a great deal to do with redemption. Only through change, through metanoia (the Greek work for change, which literally means turning around), will God’s peace and God’s justice fill the earth. Only then will the shepherd gather his flock.

Not everyone is with the program, even in Isaiah’s text. Another voice is more pessimistic about the human condition: *“What shall I cry? All people are grass, Their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.”* Disasters make people numb and afraid. The temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed; the people have lost their land, their king, and a whole generation. They have lots of reasons to be numb and afraid.

We also have lots of reasons to be numb and afraid. Exile can be the loss of a job, financial disaster, a disease, the failure of a relationship, even the approach of death. Our

nation, indeed, the whole world, has reason to be numb and afraid because of COVID-19. News commentators talk about the US losing at least one, perhaps two, economic decades, due to the financial destruction resulting from the virus.

But the final word that Isaiah speaks to the Babylonian exiles is the same one that he speaks to us today. God still controls history, despite present circumstances. God brings something new where nothing new seemed possible. God is *always* faithful to God's covenant. The prophetic word we hear in Isaiah's text becomes an anchor for us when the tangible and intangible ways we connect to a future beyond current circumstances have collapsed.

During Advent we are all asked to unlock the chains that bind us, to open up, to watch and to wait for something new, even though we may not be able to name it or to imagine what it might be. We are invited to prepare the way for something new in our lives, brought to us by a God who is moving us forward, not backward. The good news is that when we say "yes" to God, God leads us into a new reality.

All of us wait in the stillness with nothing but faith and hope that God will come to those who have saved him room. Isaiah reminds us that this is true: *"See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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."*

Advent is the time to both hear anew these ancient promises and to speak words of comfort and assurance to those who feel abandoned by God or separated from God. God *will* arrive and *will* come in gentle power. Taking better care of the baby Jesus means making room in our hearts for his coming. Amen.