

“When Prophets Speak”
December 1, 2024

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

When prophets speak, we often expect to hear harsh words of judgment—and sometimes those are the words that come to us.

This morning, we hear something different: “Comfort.”

“Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

I remember seeing a news report decades ago in which a father hugged his daughter as she cried after a tragedy. Over and over he kept telling her: “It's going to be all right. It's all right now. It's going to be all right.”

Certainly, this is how we might long to be embraced in our fear.

This is what we might long to hear in our grief.

I found out recently that this is how many in our congregation long to be addressed in their own difficult lives.

In recent years, as Advent and Christmas have approached, I've asked people what they need in their church life and in worship during these days. Each year the response changes.

One year you cried out: “Give us carols. The herald angels sing ‘Hark!’ and we don't want to wait until Christmas Eve to join in that song.”

As Advent 2020 approached, people said: “Give us hope,” which was understandable given that we were some nine months into the pandemic.

Another year what I heard most was: “Give us joy.”

This year? When the adult education group met around the fireplace in Rockwood Hall a couple of weeks ago, someone said: “Give us comfort.” And that was met with a resounding, “Yes!” People wanted comfort to get through these days.

Listen, then, this day as Isaiah speaks to us: “Comfort, O comfort my people.”

The words fall with a soft grace upon listening ears and open hearts.

And hearing, we affirm in faith that there is something in the universe that seeks an end to human suffering;

something that abhors the evil we see and do even more than we are able to see it;

something that will yet forgive the wrong we have done and hopes for the repentance of all people.

In our sorrow and in our joy, “Comfort, O comfort.”

In our best actions and in our worst: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

In our affliction and in our affluence as well, we hear that word.

Comfort, O Comfort.

Comfort, however, is strange word. I misunderstood it most of my life. Yes, “comfort” does have the sense of calming, cheering, or inspiring with hope.

But the roots of this word speak not so much of calming as *strengthening*. Comfort, remember, comes from the Latin *fortis*, strong. To “com-fort” is to strengthen much.

Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the “Comforter”—the One who gives strength to the church and to individuals.

Isaiah announces “comfort”—the strength that will be needed to lift up the valleys, to lower mountains and hills, to make rough places a plain as the people prepare the way of the Lord.

We would only dare to attempt such work in the strength of God.

When memories of past failures dare us to continue,

when present wounds seem difficult to bear,

when there seems little hope for the future,

we hear a word that comes tenderly, reminding us that—even if nobody else does—God calls each of us forward and empowers us for new life.

The promise of strength, the promise of a future, call us to action: “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.”

The wilderness can be a place of violence and lawlessness, often a cold place, a place of struggle and hope against all odds. The wilderness is hunger and homelessness. The wilderness is the fear and grief and anger that dwell in our hearts. In such desolate places we are called to prepare the way, to make the paths straight.

Friends sent a Christmas card with the usual photocopied letter detailing the high points of the past year. It was accompanied by a hand written note that read: “We didn’t include a few rough things happening in our families.” We’re often reluctant to share our rough places with *everyone*, but there they are—in all of our lives.

We are called to make the rough places smooth, but not to “smooth over” those places.

We have heard the comforting announcement of a future; we also hear the call to prepare, to prepare a new way in the wilderness—that is, to share with others the comfort, the strength that we have received.

Yes, there is another word that we also hear in the wilderness. “Repent.”

John the Baptist, whom Jesus called a prophet, directs our attention away from the shallow and transitory comforts that usually fill our lives. His words call us to center ourselves on the coming of Christ—coming among us even now—with both judgment and mercy.

John calls us to repentance. He offers us God’s forgiveness.

Our Advent preparations begin with repentance. That’s one of those dank, musty religious words that always begs to be explained. Our world has so avoided this word that we have forgotten the true spirit of repentance.

The Greeks called it *metanoia*, that is, a change of mind, turning in a new direction. If you’re running toward a cliff, the best thing you can do is to turn around. And the voice that cries, “Look out!” may be just what you need to hear.

In these busy days, for God’s sake, take some time and look at where you’re going. Look closely at your life and mark where it is God-directed and where it is not.

Where are you finding comfort and bringing comfort to others?

Where are you afflicted or the cause of affliction?

Look. Then make the slow and ever-necessary turning around. Place your feet firmly on the path that leads toward the waiting God.

The call to repentance is a call to action. We don’t just bide our time—we actively bring about the advent, the coming of God into the world.

This is the real reason behind some of our beloved Advent/Christmas traditions here: giving to special mission programs such as the Heifer Project and Church World Service, contributing to the Food Pantry, and our other giving at this time of year—at the end of a year that has been marked by great disaster and great generosity. All this is done to enable the world to be more like God’s deep desire for it. We give to provide healing, clothing, food, and shelter. As those who have received the comfort of God, we give to bring that comfort—that *strength*—to others.

When we give, when we act out of love, we learn to let go of at least some of what we have so that we can let God work through us in the world. When we give, we are preparing the way of God.

If we are fortunate, as we prepare we begin to recognize the ways in which our lifestyles contribute to hunger, to poverty, to violence—to the affliction of the world. And we repent—that is, we turn in the opposite direction.

This is the active waiting of Advent.

These days are a time for us to give special attention to the way of life we are to live all year long—bringing tidings of comfort to those who dwell in the shadow places of our city and our world. Let us still be generous in remembering the poor, the hungry, the homeless. Let us make sure that our gifts matter all the more.

When prophets speak, listen.

In a world of affliction, we will still hear God's word of comfort.

When prophets speak, listen.

Even now, we hear God's call to prepare a new road in a world of affliction and to bring to others tidings of the comfort that is strength.