

## **Second Sunday of Advent December 10, 2023**

### **Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8**

The arms of our mother or father wrapped around us as we sit on their laps.  
Warm and safe.

Our favorite recipe of grandma's, a mug of hot chocolate on a cold winter's day.  
A favorite song playing on the radio, the warmth of the sun and a cool summer breeze as you sit outside.

All things that make us comfortable. Physically at ease, safe. That calm us when we are in distress. Give us hope. The promise that all will be well.

The prophet Isaiah hears God's command to, "Comfort, comfort now my people."  
Make them feel safe and at ease.

Is comfort what John the Baptist is proclaiming? He appears in the wilderness. That place in the Hebrew imagination that was scary, lonely, filled with demons, and trials, danger and pain. A place that reminded the Jews of their long journey, led by God, from slavery into freedom. A crucible through which the Israelites wandered for a generation, learning to trust God and God's provision in their lives. Manna to eat, a pillar of cloud and fire to follow.

From this place of trial and danger, standing in the waters of the river Jordan that marked the boundary between wilderness and promised land, John proclaims. He announces something. Something that drew people out of the bustling and important metropolis of Jerusalem- enough to entice the people into a day's walk (about 25 miles one way) to get there.

What brought those people a day's journey, the equivalent of traveling from here to Lexington, KY by car, to the edge of wilderness? What caught the imagination of those throngs of people?

To begin with, it might have been this wild character, dressed in camels' hair, eating locusts and wild honey to evoke the image of the prophet Elijah. A rock star the likes of Taylor Swift! But one who, knowing the dangers of this world, always pointed beyond himself. To the one more powerful than he was. Who said, I'm just laying the groundwork. Beginning to give you a glimpse of the one who is more powerful than I am.

But what underlay their coming? What were they feeling? What could motivate them to do that? Travel all that way?

Perhaps it was a sense, under the oppression of the Roman Empire, that hope was lost? Perhaps it was a sense that there was nothing worth living for? Perhaps they felt that nothing would change without something big happening?

Whatever it was, the stakes were high for them. High enough to bring them back to the boundary waters between wandering and home.

And what comfort did John proclaim to them? What words were offered that were the equivalent of a big hug from mom?

A baptism of repentance. Of changing of the mind.

Baptism in the Jewish tradition is something that marks a change in a person. A washing away of something old. A renewal. Here it is an outward sign of an

inward action. A repentance, a changing of the mind. One that moves a person away from sin, which is ultimately trust in something or someone other than God.

What is the comfort John offers in his proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin? That is echoed in the rest of scripture.

The promise is, our God is not like humans. God forgives us, completely. Never to remember. God speaks peace to the faithful. Not war. God is chesed- steadfastly loyal to us. Immovable by anyone or anything in saying to us... you are mine! God is the one who brings righteousness and peace to God's people.

The word of comfort is that God is not like humans. God is patient- long suffering- wanting not the destruction of people but their salvation. And God is willing to wait around for us to wise up. To actually hear the words of God's messengers.

Comfort, Comfort. O my people. For unlike most humans, with God, you can change your mind, be forgiven. You can be awakened to see the reality of who God is, who you are, who the world is. The reality that God has come to us in Jesus. Come not to condemn the world, but to save it.

Comfort, Comfort, O my people. Have some tomato soup and a grilled cheese. Wrap yourself in a blanket and sit on mama's lap.

We need that proclamation ourselves, don't we? Especially today.

I was talking with an old friend on Friday and we both wound up shaking our heads at the world around us.

Another mass shooting at UNLV. The 39<sup>th</sup> this year, marking a record level of mass gun violence since at least 2006. Gun violence that has been the number one cause of death in children since 2020. The resumption of the war in Gaza which is killing Palestinian civilians at an alarming rate, with at least 10,000 killed so far, leaving tens of thousands more wounded and millions as refugees. The ongoing reporting of sexual violence against women by Hamas on October 7. The growing coarseness of our public discourse, where insults and braggadocio are applauded and take the place of actual conversation and problem solving.

A record breaking 23 weather and climate disasters in the US this year exceeding \$57.6 billion in costs.

The ongoing mental health crisis in our nation and in our state- among our children and youth, but also our farmers. Increased rates of loneliness among the population- despite having cell phones and all the interconnectedness it supposedly brings. I wonder about that. We may be connected, but are we really in relationship in the fullness of that term?

We both paused in the conversation, looking a bit away. Feeling defeated.

Comfort, comfort, O my people echoed in my head. What to proclaim in this moment?

I was reading more of the Rev. Dr. Sam Giere's book this week *Freedom and Imagination*. And was reminded again about the imagination of faith. Faith is trust, but also a way of seeing the world. Giere argues that bad faith is one enslaved to the power of sin and death. One that mistakes imitation golden calves- things, relationships, power, ideology - for God. A place where the

imagination is captive to death and formed toward that which cannot ultimately give life. The vision my friend and I had in that moment of a world where only darkness was closing in.

One that left us vulnerable as Jesus warned us a few weeks ago, to those false prophets who would come and say, I can save you. Or this product will save you. Or this belief will save you.

Comfort, Comfort, O my people.

Giere reminds us that in Jesus (as Psalm 85 says) the chesed, steadfast love and faithfulness of God will meet. In him, righteousness and peace will kiss each other. What a wonderful image of Jesus.

When we are in Christ, we are given the imagination, the vision to see. We are equipped, empowered to change our “stinkin’ thinkin’”, to repent. And while our capacity to envision reality in Christ is always partial, when it does come into focus- as it often does so well this time of year, because we’re paying attention in a way we don’t normally- it is a beautiful and inspiring thing. The seemingly invincible power of sin and death, fear and hate, melt away as the crucified and risen Christ shows up behind the locked doors of our hearts, saying, “Peace be with you.” Shalom be with you. Shalom, which is so much more than absence of conflict. It is wholeness. A pulling together that creates a pool of water so deep, nothing can stir it.

In this Advent season we see the vulnerability of God come into the world not as a buff leader of armies, but the newborn child of an ordinary couple. In the life of Jesus, especially as told by Mark, we see a Messiah not of power and might using

force and violence to accomplish his righteous mission of relieving the Jews oppression. Rather, Jesus speaks truth in love, calls, heals, reconciles, and in the end stretches his arms out on the cross and receives all of our sin. Our imperfection. Our fears. Our hatred. Our violence. Takes them into himself and makes them as nothing. Showing that they truly have no power over us.

Because- that boychild of Mary. The Son of the Living God is not bound... even by death. In the resurrection of Jesus, we see the illusory power of death. And in so doing are able to shake off its power over our lives.

Comfort, Comfort O my people!

This is God's cry to us. To look upon Jesus and know that in him God has entered our struggles. That when we are in him, we sit in the lap of our mother- like when we would skin our knee- and know that despite our pain, our sorrow, our fears, all will be right in the end.

And, this is our charge from God.

Comfort, comfort the world, O my people.

A call for us to proclaim to other scared, wondering, wandering humans a word of comfort. To tell them that we know where to get the best tomato soup and grilled cheese! A place of peace and wholeness. To invite them to join us as we enter into the divine imagination come to fruition in Jesus and see the world in a different way.

Comfort, comfort, O my people. For in the one who is coming, Jesus of Nazareth, God's victory is assured.