

Sermon for December 6, 2020—“Tidings of Comfort and Joy”

Second Sunday of Advent, Year B—Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11, 27-31; Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort, o comfort my people.”

These are God’s ancient words to his people spoken through the prophet Isaiah in the 6th century BC. Their relevance and timeliness, however, aren’t lost on us today. It’s not hard to find people in discomfort, people living in exile and a world in turmoil. God’s words ring true in every age, place, and life, because exile happens in every age, place, and life. Exile takes us to the wilderness.

In the wilderness the mountains are high, the valleys are low and the ground is rough and uneven. Many of us have climbed the mountains of arrogance, ego and pride. Likewise, we’ve descended into the valleys of despair, depression, and fear. Perhaps even the valley of the shadow of death. We’ve travelled the rough and uneven ground of sorrow, loss, and pain. The wilderness isn’t so much about the geography around us, as it about the landscape within us. It’s not just a description of our lives and our world, it’s also a description of Israel in today’s first reading.

Foreign armies have defeated the Israelites, taken them prisoner and carted them off to a foreign land. Their Promised Land has been overtaken by others and their temple—the place where God was believed to dwell—has been destroyed. God—however—didn’t do this to them. They did it to themselves. Their own choices, their ways of life, their sinfulness have brought this about.

I’d be willing to bet that every one of us could tell a story about a time when we were in exile. A time when we felt alienated from life, from ourselves, from those we love and perhaps even from God. Some of us may be in exile now. Exiles live in a foreign land; a land of guilt and regret, fear, sorrow and despair.

This is **never** where God intends for us to live. It’s not our home, but sometimes it’s where we find ourselves. Our thoughts, words and deeds, things done and left undone, are the roads by which we came to this land of exile. Sometimes we intentionally choose those roads for ourselves. Other times it seems as if we have no choice at all. We do the best we can at the time, often forgetting that there’s a different way. A better way. God’s way. And while there are many paths **into** exile, there’s but only one way **out**—the way of the Lord.

Like ancient Israel, we long to hear words of comfort. We want to know that there is One coming. One who is able to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Someone to love us. Forgive us. Heal us. Save us. Give us peace and take us home.

Imagine the darkest place of your life; the fear, the anxiety, the anger, the hurt—wondering when—or if—it will end. You drag around guilt and regret like a ball and chain wherever you go. The days are filled with “should’ve” and the nights with “if only.” Over and over the past is replayed, to the point that you can see no future. All you can see is exile, alienation, wilderness.

That is the situation into which God speaks words of comfort. Even when you see no way out, no hope and you think that all is lost, God cries out to you, “Comfort, O comfort!” Those aren’t sentimental, patronizing words. God does not put his arm around us saying, “There, there. Feel better.” They are much more. They are words of God’s encouragement and comfort, strength and peace. They make possible what God asks of us. In those words God says, “I have never forgotten you. I heard your cries—I felt your need. My heart broke for love of you. I am sending One to bring you home, One who is more powerful than you.”

God sends Isaiah to carry his words of comfort to Israel and to us. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...” he instructs Isaiah. God knows that life in the wilderness is fragile. That it’s not a time for condemnation, judgment, or ridicule. Sometimes exiles are holding on by a thread. They need words of encouragement, words of comfort and hope. Isaiah is to speak softly to their heart. He is to call them home. This is—after all—what repentance is about. It’s about coming home.

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance, he was echoing Isaiah’s words. “It is time to come home.” Repentance prepares the way of the Lord. It prepares the way home. God promises that the mountains will be made low, the valleys will be lifted up and the rough and uneven ground will become a level plain. The way will be prepared.

But this is less about our getting out as it is about God in Christ getting in. God is always coming to us. There is no situation in which God cannot come to us. Isaiah reminds us that there, “Ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley low enough, ain’t no river wide enough,” to keep God from getting to us. “Here is your God,” Isaiah exclaims to Israel in the foreign land of exile. “Here is your God.”

God comes to us in the worst places imaginable. He gathers us in his arms, holds us close and carries us home. God’s words of comfort and joy come to us in our exile. Our wilderness is the geography of new beginnings, reconciled relationships and salvation.

It all starts with repentance. Repentance—where God is concerned—is not so much about the guilt of the **past**, but a **present** hope that reveals a new **future**. A hopeful future.

But here, brothers and sisters, is the thing: Love and new life cannot be sustained by the same old ways and means that which took us into exile. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “We do not come to God as bad people trying to become good people. We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved—we are rebels who must lay down our arms.” Or—as the late Ravi Zacharias said, “Jesus Christ didn’t come into the world to make bad people good. He came into the world to make dead people live.” So deeper change is needed. There must be a conversion—a change of heart.

If new life and love are to last, we must call into question our usual ways of being and doing. We must be willing to grow, embrace change and new life. We must face the truth of our life—not as the final judgment of our lives, but as the foundation for our hope, expectation and longing for the One who is more powerful.

Name the places of alienation and exile in your life and your will also name the opportunities for repentance and homecoming. Repentance happens when exile and words of comfort meet. We do not repent so that we can hear God's words of comfort. God speaks words of comfort so that we might repent.

"Comfort, O comfort my people."

Come Lord Jesus. Amen and amen.