

“Reaching with Comfort”

OT: Isaiah 40:1-11

NT: 2 Peter 3:8-15a

Growing up, my mom was my comforter. I will admit it, I was a bit of a momma’s boy. Let me share a story. There are several to choose from, but one stands out. When I was a young child, before my sister who is 5 years younger than me was born, we were visiting family in Long Bo Key, and my brother, 3 years older than me, and I were playing. As was often the case, my brother was getting me to try something I should not be doing. I did it anyway because I was not going to be outdone. I put my arms out and spun around as fast and as many times as I could. The helicopter we used to call it. It was so much fun. I happened to be in a crib, or travel play pin of sorts, and when I began to fall, my chin connected on the sweet spot of the corner, causing my teeth to break through my tongue. I wish I could tell you that was enough to teach me my lesson to never do it again, but it happened a few years later as well and that time involved a glass coffee table and my forehead.

So, why do I share this with you this morning? What did I need at the time? Other than a towel and stitches of course, I needed my mom. “Mommy, Mommy. I want mommy,” I cried. And the wonderful mother she was and still is, she would have the wonderful pleasure of holding my head while I screamed and wailed in the back seat of our Buick station wagon, with the third row that faced backward, for a couple hours as we traveled back home to the ER. Clearly, I am fine today, but I will not and cannot say without the presence of my mom, and my dad too, comforting me in tough moments throughout my life.

Such is the human life. At one point or another, and probably many points, we need comfort. It was with the people of God throughout history. It is with us today, the church, the body of Christ. We cannot say we are or will ever be fine without the presence of God being with us, reaching out to us with comfort, and strengthening us with hope and purpose.

The text we read in Isaiah is a bold declaration about the character of God offered to a demoralized people. It is good news about God’s comfort and God’s promise of redemption for a people who lived in exile for some 150 years. Can you imagine? 150 years?

One author reflects and invites us to imagine. “YHWH the God of Israel has assembled a heavenly host. This is no council of bickering gods but servants of the sovereign of the universe, whose compassion and regard for justice distinguish this God from other gods. At issue is the situation of God’s children, the people of Israel. We can hardly imagine their misery, unless we think of peoples of the earth in our own time who share their agony. Stripped of institutional structures that shaped their lives, their temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, the people of Israel languish under the thumb of

Marduk, the Babylonian God. God responds to such conditions by bringing together the council. (Maybe that is where we Presbyterians get the idea of committees for everything) After visiting with the council, God is prepared to announce a message that God intends for the people of Israel. In it, one can see into the very depths of the character of God, the one the church calls "Sovereign." The message is life-altering as the God who rebukes and sends into exile is also the God whose mighty arm **can mend what is broken and make right what has been distorted.** God is no ordinary shepherd. God's mighty arm is not that of an arbitrary tyrant but that of a gentle shepherd who carries the flock close to the chest. God's strength is that of comfort and compassion. God wills comfort and consolation to those in the very depths of despair and depends upon human as well as divine agency to bring that message from God's royal realm."

Richard F. Ward, George Stroup (FOTW)

What we can glean from this Isaiah text is nothing short of divine.

First, we must recognize there are those who are fearful and despairing...

"Disasters, whether human or natural, make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. They undermine faith in God and faith in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure. In the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; it occupied the land for 50 years. The exquisite poetry of the prophet Isaiah emerges in the decades after the invasion like a healing, life-creating song. (What does it do? Why is it so important?) It seeks to bring back to life a people crushed under a shroud of death. Isaiah, with God, imagines a nation restored, a city rebuilt, and a people reunited."

Kathleen M. O'Connor (FOTW)

Second, in the fear and despair, God reaches out with words of comfort...

"For a grieving, futureless people, few words could be more surprising than, "Comfort, comfort my people." The divine command to comfort responds directly to the unmet yearnings of the people of Jerusalem depicted throughout the book of Lamentations. There the destroyed city, known as Zion, cries out for comfort and for God to notice her suffering. There God remains silent, but here in Isaiah, God opens with the longed-for consoling speech. Jerusalem has suffered "double for all her sins." Zion's suffering is massively disproportionate to anything she may have done. For Isaiah, the people's sin does not adequately explain the historical disaster. He reinterprets the past, argues with other interpreters, and with imaginative daring challenges the theological status quo of blame and despair."

Kathleen M. O'Connor (FOTW)

"Comfort, comfort, my people!" God says through Isaiah.

Third, the words of comfort are followed by preparation...

With hope and anticipation in the coming comfort, the people are to prepare for what is coming. What does that look like? “Smooth out the highway, flatten the mountains, raise up the valleys, make the way clear for a speedy arrival: *(take care of business, throw away the trash in your life, and prepare your house, your temple, for the most important welcome ever)* for the “glory of the Lord shall appear.” Prepare! Get ready! God is not just sending words of comfort; God is coming to be the comfort. Prepare for the presence of the Lord. To this abandoned, battered community who supposed God has left them or had been defeated by stronger Babylonian gods, Isaiah announces that God approaches on the highway they are preparing.”

Kathleen M. O'Connor (FOTW)

Fourth, the preparation is necessary and worth it because God's word is sure...

Isaiah declares, “the mouth of the Lord has spoken”. You are to prepare for the coming comfort of the Lord because God has said so. And it matters that God said it because “the word of our God will stand forever.” The divine word of God is sure, steady, durable, and reliable. People will come and go. Situations will come and go. But the word of the Lord will stand forever.

As the arm of God, Isaiah reaches out to the people of God, to you and me today even, and says, “Look! Take comfort, your God! Look! Take comfort, your God comes with strength! Look! Take comfort, your God's reward is with him!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is strong enough to comfort us. To be clear, we are not to be mistaken about God's strength. “It is not the strength of a bloody avenger, a violent brute, or a demanding judge (like the people thought they needed to defeat their despair). No, God's strength appears in the barely thinkable power of gentleness, in tender and caring presence, in intimacy such as a shepherd expresses when gathering the wounded, scattered flock.”

Kathleen M. O'Connor (FOTW)

9 a.m.- “Come to Me”... “Come to the Table”... Find Rest. Find Comfort. Find Strength.

At this time of year, we tend to think of the church only as the recipients of these words from on high. We like to cast ourselves as the shepherds who hear the choirs of angels broadcast the startling announcement of God's coming as warrior and shepherd. But do these words from Isaiah and God's reaching out to us with comfort suggest something more? Yes! Just as the bread of life and cup of salvation are meant to change us, for we cannot be the same after receiving the gifts of God, the words of God reaching out to us with comfort are meant to change us. And by change here, I mean direct and guide and empower us in where we go and what we do.

As the people of God, we are called to receive God's presence and comfort and strength, and we are called to reach back to God by reaching out to others with comfort. I believe it is fitting then this week that many members of our care and nurture team are reaching out with poinsettias to those who are homebound or have lost a loved one this past year.

But it is not just this week we are called to reach with comfort. "These words from Isaiah are not just for us to savor like food at a holiday feast. We are in the situation of the celestial ones and the prophets in the text, trying to find a way to speak them to others that God loves. The faithful people of God (you and me) are commissioned to do this. In the face of derision and indifference, we are to speak of our God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the other "gods" who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships: gods like consumerism, lustful greed, war, and religious zealotry. We are called today, in this time and place throughout our lives, to speak words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God that God will indeed arrive and will indeed come be with us."

Richard F. Ward (FOTW)

A little more than a week ago was Thanksgiving, and now in the church we have started a new year with the season of Advent, the traditional period of holy waiting leading to Christmas. Christmas is not yet here but it is close enough to taste it and see it (helped of course by all the stores in town turning to Christmas stuff a couple months ago). Chances are we are anxious and excited about the joy celebrated that day. It is coming, for the calendar says so, but it is not yet here. To be ready, we must prepare. And as we get things in order, hang the stockings, wrap the presents, bake the cookies, and set out the milk, we ask ourselves "Are we ready?"

But what are we really waiting for in Advent? In what has been a hellacious year for many of us, a year when we have been exhausted and exploited and complicit all at the same time, what are we really waiting for? What have we found ourselves crying out to God for? Companionship? Community? Do you hunger and thirst for justice? Do you wish to be filled by something more sustainable? Do you long for comfort?

Mike Morrell declares in an article about reuniting the soul and body, "I'm tired of living as a discarnate, hungry ghost. I'm ready to journey with people, backed by all the divine energies of God, angels, and the great cloud of witnesses, to work together in discovering the kin-dom of God (the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible-Charles Eisenstein)."

What his realization asks us is whether we are ready to journey together as the people of God reaching out to others with the comfort of God's strength and good news? The apostle Paul declares that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit was sent to dwell in us, as our breath and life. The sacred breath of God fills our lungs. This means God is ready in us. As God comes as comfort to be with us, so shall we "Go" (and reach) in God's name.

Isaiah's portrait to the people of God in Isaiah 40 says "Comfort, Comfort my people. Prepare. The presence of the Lord is coming. You can count on it." We did not read it earlier, but I want to send us out with the words Isaiah 40 concludes with,

**"The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the end of the earth.
The Lord does not faint or grow weary;
the Lord's understanding is unsearchable.
The Lord gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."** (Isaiah 40:28-31)

Let all God's people say... Amen.