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First Presbyterian Church  
December 6, 2020  
Advent 2B  
Isaiah 40:1-11

### **“Peace Is On Its Way”**

I love Christmas, and thankfully I’m married to someone who loves Christmas. Terry and I have far too many Christmas decorations, we enjoy picking out Christmas gifts for our children, and we over indulge in cookies and candy at this time of year.

For this reason I’ll confess that I’ve always struggled a bit with these scripture readings the lectionary doles out at Advent. John the Baptist? Who wants to hear from that Grinch during the happiest time of the year? Stories of the Second Coming, such as we heard last week? I’m ready to jump ahead to Luke 2 and hear about Mary and Joseph and shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. And all those Advent hymns in their minor key? Who has time for those when there are so many Christmas ones to sing? I’m sure I’ve left more than one church musician or liturgical purist scratching his or her head at why we’re singing Hark the Herald Angels Sing on the 3rd Sunday of Advent.

In normal years, aka any year but 2020, I’m perplexed as to why Scripture asks us to dwell in the wilderness in the weeks leading up Christmas. This is Advent, after all, not Lent.

But 2020 is far from normal.

In every other year, I’ve managed to deftly dwell in the wilderness as short a time as possible both liturgically and culturally. Why, I could practically ignore it altogether in the midst of parties and gift exchanges, and open houses and caroling.

But not this year. This year is different. This year, I have time in my calendar. I’m not going to parties or open houses or cookies exchanges or holiday concerts. In fact, I’m not really going . . . anywhere. It’s odd, and it doesn’t feel much like Christmas. It feels more like, well . . . like Advent, I suppose. Like Advent is supposed to feel – which is to say a time of deep longing and yearning and

praying for God to come and make things right. And indeed, I find myself praying for just that over and over again. Please dear Lord, please come, and make things right. If there was ever a year we needed God to come and make things right, it's this one.

And so here we are, laid bare. Powerless. We can only wait (we've gotten good at that), and watch, as if our lives depend on God. Because they do.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appears.

In both of our readings for today, the people were waiting for God to come and make things right. The people listening to Mark's gospel were living in spiritual exile. Jerusalem was under siege; conditions were bad; people were divided. Some people wanted to force the infidels out of the region while others said submission to Rome was the path to progress. People were anxious for peace and security. Emperor Nero had died, four would-be emperors had been assassinated, and the general who did the pillaging had been crowned the new emperor. The people longed and waited for God to come and make things right.

In Isaiah, the people are literally in exile. The Assyrians had destroyed most of Judah and had besieged Jerusalem until the Assyrian king miraculously decided to withdraw his troops from the capital and return to Ninevah. But when he returned, his sons assassinated him, leaving the door open for envoys from Babylon to return to Jerusalem to loot and pillage it, destroy it, and exile its citizens to Babylon where they would live as POWs. It was an awful existence, the type of existence that makes you wish you had been killed with everyone else. The people lived like this for 70 years. During this time, many of the original exiles died, while others were born. But all of them longed and waited for God to come and make things right.

It's into this situation that Isaiah comes and announces to the exiled: "Comfort, comfort my people." He speaks into their world of hopelessness and depression a word of tenderness after a very long and dark night and announces that God is both powerful and gentle, able to comfort as well as defend. This God is a shepherd who will lead them home.

It was just the message of hope the exiled people needed to hear. Things are terrible now, but take comfort, Isaiah says: there is a tomorrow.

Isaiah 40 is addressed to those exiles. But the Good News is that Word of God also comes to us, and is addressed to us; for we are exiles, too. Because exile, as Walter Brueggemann says, isn't just a geographical place, it's the place we live where all our old securities are gone. It's the place we live when our loved ones are lost; our bodies are failing us; and the foundation we built is slipping away. Exile is the place we find ourselves this Advent, where the usual family gatherings are unwise to hold, where there is perhaps little money for Christmas presents, or where a loved one's chair is forever empty.

These are our places of exile, we who have experienced intense feelings of dislocation and anger about the way things are or about what we have suffered. At the end of our ropes, with pandemic fatigue; where everything is doubly hard, and I just want to stroll through Target with a Starbucks in hand – is that too much to ask? This is where we find ourselves, at a place where we can't negotiate peace across our dinner tables let alone across the globe. This is where we are. And this is where God comes, with the message and intention that we will be comforted. In the face of pessimism, this Scripture announces a fierce and firm hope: there is divine presence in the wilderness. God will comfort and carry through the rough places those who have been abandoned.

Friends, in the midst of darkness, light breaks in. In the midst of despair, hope erupts. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. This is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

Advent is all about looking forward to the future with hope. But this isn't a wishy-washy, mealy mouthed "I hope it'll come true" sort of hope. As followers of Jesus, we can't magically take away the pain of those hurting. But we can be bearers of great comfort. In a world where there are wildfires and shootings, daily death counts and overrun hospitals, hope can spring from the smallest of acts: a friendly wave, a heartfelt greeting, or a neighbor's willingness to help when desert and wilderness seem to surround us. This is where God is found.

I'm often reminded at times like this that we don't need to go on an endless search for God, because God comes to us and is among us comforting those in

trouble, smoothing the rough places, declaring a hope beyond the limits of our days, and gathering all of us wounded and broken.

Isaiah declares it: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength ... lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9).

What do I see on the high mountain?

I see people going out of their way to bring comfort to others.

I see a church giving a gaga pit to a school that lacks a good playground, and donating money to put shoes on the feet of children who desperately need them.

I see a church doing the hard work of racial understanding, and wanting to tear down the walls that divide.

I see a church sending cards, and making calls, to people who are alone or in the hospital or have had a loved one recently die.

I see you, church.

And so it is that the prophet proclaims to us down through the centuries, in the year of our Lord 2020: “Comfort, comfort my people.” And then: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” Friends, the promise of scripture is that there will be a way home, even when there seems to be no way, because God is coming on the one-way highway that leads straight to us. When we need comfort the most, when we’re in our deepest pit and our darkest hour, God comes and says “comfort, comfort, my people.”

This is Advent hope and it is defiant courage. It’s the courage to believe that with God, all things are possible. It’s the courage to believe that no matter what happens, no matter what bleak, miserable stuff life and the world throws at us, that God is coming. And not only is God coming, but God is coming for you.

This is the promise of Advent. That the God who set in the world in motion at the very beginning, is also the God who raised up a Savior for us, who came to us, who lived among us, and who was born among us.

Last week I spent a good chunk of time decorating my home for Christmas and putting up not just one Christmas tree but 3 Christmas trees. I enjoy decorating the house for Christmas but, as I decorated, I wondered why I was wasting time doing it. After all, no one will be at my home to see it except my family. Does it really matter when company isn't coming how the place looks? But then I remembered that company is coming. God is coming! And if there was ever a year that we needed God to come and make things right, this is the year. So I put up my decorations *and even got new ones* in defiant anticipation that despite all odds and a global pandemic, I still believe God is coming!

This is the promise of Advent. God will come with love and healing and hope into your life, whoever you are. God will come with light into whatever darkness you find yourself. God will come into your life, even when you can't believe that's possible.

In Advent, God meets us in the wilderness – a place I have long tried to avoid at this time of year and have managed to successfully do with my endless to-do list and places to be. But this year, I am laid bare – and perhaps, so are you. We can only wait (we've gotten good at that), and watch, as if our lives depend on God. Because they do.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appears.

Amen.

Sources:

Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, commentary on Isaiah 40 for the second Sunday of Advent

[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) "Dear Working Preacher" and commentary on Isaiah 40

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