

December 6, 2020

Advent 2

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

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...

Maybe you've noticed that as this year of discomfort starts to draw to a close, there are some Christmas gifts that are being marketed as being especially cozy and comfortable. Fuzzy throws from IKEA and pajamas for staying in or working at home are popular. Promises of comfort and joy come from the man who invented *My Pillow*; and from those selling weighted blankets that can calm a restless body, reduce feelings of anxiety, and make you feel like you're being hugged.

Comfort can be described as feelings of contentment, consolation, and peacefulness. For some people, it also feels like security, or being prepared. During this COVID pandemic, "preppers" who believe in stockpiling food and supplies for worst-case scenarios have felt vindicated in their preparedness. Not everyone goes to such extremes, but you may have heard that in Kansas there is a 15 story underground "Survival Condo" built in what was a missile silo. It offers security to 75 people who will be able to survive in a sealed, self-sufficient habitat for 5 years, with the comfort of a swimming pool, movie theatre, and fake sunshine. Condo prices range from \$1-4 million and are sold out. We can be sure that is not what Isaiah has in mind.

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The thousands of Jewish people who were taken captive after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem had endured 70 years of exile. Stripped of their societal structure, their Temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, the people languish. Most Biblical scholars believe that as the exile went on, they adapted to life in Babylon as best they could, working and raising families. But can you imagine? Different language, foods, culture, customs, and gods--how could they ever feel at home?

The good news of Isaiah must have been difficult to trust: God was going to make a way for them to go back to Israel. God would come to them with might and strength, but also with comfort--like a shepherd caring for all the flock, even the smallest lambs. This Biblical promise is a historical one as well--Babylon was conquered by Persia, and the Jewish people were freed to go home again.

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If you know Handel's *Messiah*, maybe you can hear a high, clear tenor voice singing this phrase. What would it mean to you to be comforted by God on the second Sunday of Advent, during one of the hardest years we have collectively and individually endured?

For many of us, we imagine comfort as being able to go back to 'normal,' or the way things were before everything changed in March. If we step back for a minute and think about it though, that's magical thinking, because how we live, how we see things, and perhaps even who we are has changed through this pandemic experience. Going backward in time isn't really possible. That cliché of a "new normal" will be true, but we're not there yet, are we? Many of us have known grief, fear, worry, exhaustion, loneliness, and a whole host of other emotions in these months--and perhaps also wondering and questioning where God is, how God is present in so much suffering.

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John appears in the wilderness near the river Jordan. A prophet, a forerunner for Jesus--someone who is not preparing the way for his own selfish survival, but so that the ministry and love of Jesus has a cultivated place to begin. Perhaps John's message doesn't sound very comforting, with the call to repent. But isn't there comfort in being invited to be honest and our full selves before God? To tell the truth about the things we 'have done and left undone,' as one of our confessions says, and to trust that we are received with mercy and forgiveness again and again.

That's a piece of the Good News that Mark declares in the very first verse of this Gospel. That invitation proclaims that there is nowhere we can go, nothing we can

do, nothing that we will experience that will keep us from the fierce compassion of God in Christ.

Like Isaiah, John declares “Here is your God!”--in the words and actions of Jesus that will follow this beginning in the wilderness. Like a shepherd, Jesus will care for the sheep; as a servant, he will always value the last first; as One who knows the agony of loneliness and suffering, Jesus enters fully into our human life and death; raised from death, Christ promises that where we might see only endings, there is always hope and new beginnings--not only for ourselves, but for the world God loves. “Your God,” our God, never stands aloof or unmoved by our human life, it’s joys and sorrows.

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So what does the comfort of God look like, feel like to you this day? The strong embrace of God’s mighty arms...a peace that promises unity to the human family...a love that refuses to let go of us and who is present in tears, hurt, and brokenness...and maybe ‘God’s love with skin’--the friends, family, community, this congregation--where we give and receive support, grace, and love.

As always in our journey of faith, we are invited to share that comfort we receive with others. To say, vehemently or in a quiet whisper, or with our actions: “Here is God”: born in a stable; always beside the marginalized, the burdened, the suffering, the doubting; and with us now.