

Faith Mennonite Church
December 7, 2008
Advent 2: The Comforting Face of God

“Comfort: More than a sleep number”
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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

What does it look like when God offers us comfort? We have a variety of familiar images of comfort: Every week on *A Prairie Home Companion* Garrison Keillor offers the comfort of a good night’s rest, guaranteed with a personalized sleep number. Many of us have our favorite comfort foods for when we’re ill or feeling blue. And on these cold Minnesota days and evenings, many of us take comfort in a fire in the fireplace, hot chocolate or tea, and a warm afghan or fleece blanket. On Friday as I visited Andy and Alisa in the hospital, I watched a new father swaddle his new baby and calm her in his comforting arms.

When Isaiah spoke God’s words of comfort, he was not speaking to the everyday need for comfort from exhaustion or pain after a long day’s work. He was speaking to a situation more akin to the devastation felt in New York City after September 11, or in Bagdad after the “shock and awe” bombing by the United States in the opening days of the US invasion of Iraq, or in Mumbai this past Thanksgiving weekend. Israel was not seeking comfort from drought or a minor falling out with God. Israel had been devastated—its beloved city Jerusalem overrun by an invading army, its temple desecrated and destroyed. And if that were not enough, a portion of its population was taken captive to live in Babylon.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush offered comfort to Americans by encouraging us to go out and shop to boost the economy and then to support a war against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. God’s prescription for comfort, as recorded in Isaiah, offers something very different.

First, the comfort that God brings begins with an utterance, a declaration, raising our voice. It involves a cry for help and a proclamation of a new reality. In these 11 verses we have at least 16 occurrences of words like voice, cry, speak, say, herald, tidings. These words are performative and transformative: they state a reality that God, through the prophet, calls God’s people to live into. We will never find comfort dwelling on our turmoil or reciting the wrongs that have been inflicted upon us. God’s offer of comfort asks us to have the courage to envision a new reality, to trust that our current woes will pass, and to daily walk into that new reality. “Comfort, O comfort, my people.”

Second, the comfort of God doesn’t airlift us out of troubled times or encapsulate us in a protective cocoon. God’s comfort comes when we open ourselves to change, or are thrust into change—even when it is painful. Verses 3 and 4 of Isaiah 40 use the metaphor of highway

construction—cutting out straight paths for highways, leveling the uneven places. If the prophet were writing today and lived in our community, he'd likely be thinking of the work taking place on 35W and Crosstown. How we loathe the inconvenience, the long lines of creeping cars. But there is no way to bring change to those portions of roadway without tearing apart the old and rebuilding the new in the very same path.

Now with road construction, we at least have a clear sense of the purpose for the upheaval and we have hope of free flowing traffic some day in the future. But situations of change that ultimately bring comfort to our lives are often more ambiguous and obscure. We sometimes need years to be able to look back and to see that God truly has brought us comfort. We will recall that the children of Israel wandered for a full 40 years in order to be remade as a people before they were ready to enter the comfort and the rest of the Promised Land.

We don't like upheaval. We don't like curve balls or circumstances that take us in directions we had not intended to go. We're tempted to check out or turn to some form of pain reliever rather than to explore what the pain might teach us about our bodies, about ourselves. Historians and biblical scholars now tell us that the time of the exile was one of the most creative times in Jewish history, a time when major portions of the first five books of the Bible were edited into the form that they have come down to us today. Words that shaped and gave comfort to future generations were the product of troubled times. "Comfort, O comfort, my people."

Finally, the comfort of God comes as we recognize our weakness and let go of the notion that we can somehow be in control of our lives. The prophet says that we are like grass that withers and a flower that fades. But grass and flowers are also resilient. Some of you will recall the Midwest drought of 1988. My family and I were living in Michigan that summer, about an hour from Ann Arbor where one of my cousins got married that August. She and her fiancé planned an outdoor wedding in the back pasture of the farm where she had grown up. All summer through the long drought the pasture became increasingly brown and brittle, not an attractive place for a wedding. But invitations went out and plans proceeded. Then, just one week before the wedding, the rains came, and they came abundantly. One week later we gathered in a green pasture for the wedding celebration. Admitting our weakness, being open about our doubts and our dry times, allows God to shower us with the rain of care by people around us.

John the Baptist, who lived and ministered as a prelude to Jesus, demonstrated these same characteristics. He cried out, calling on people to accept a new reality that was breaking in around them. He called for change, inviting people to repent and turn from their old ways toward something new. And he baptized people who were willing to confess their weakness and their sin, who were willing to put aside pretense and be taken into the water by one who dressed in camel's hair and lived on locusts and wild honey. The comfort he offered was the refining fire of the Holy Spirit who would be present in Jesus.

And what is this refining fire? Both Isaiah and John proclaimed the coming of one who was powerful. Isaiah said the “Lord God” comes with *might*, and his arm *rules* for him; his *reward* is with him, and his *recompense* before him. The prophet continued with a surprising interpretation of might, rule, reward and recompense: This God of might feeds the flock like a shepherd and rules by gathering the lambs in his arms. This God rewards by carrying the lambs in her bosom and gently leading the mother sheep. No matter how cataclysmic our life might feel, God will carry us through.

The communion table that we gather around this morning is a reminder of God’s unique comfort. At this table we recall the conflict, the pain, and the cross that Jesus endured. And we recall the reconciliation that Jesus’ life and his death set in motion. As we prepare to come to the table, let us hear these words of comfort from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the [Mother] of mercies and the God of all consolation, ⁴who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. ⁵For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. ⁶If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. ⁷Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. (2 Corinthians 1: 3-7, 20)

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