

Second Sunday of Advent, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85:9-14; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.” Isaiah’s prophesy begins with these powerful and heart-felt words, “Comfort, give comfort.” We are a people in need of comfort, God’s comfort. Not unlike the Hebrew people who were in exile at the hands of the Babylonians, we are in our own “exile” of sorts. The pandemic has drastically changed our lives. And while we are not taken from our homes, we are living a type of exile in our homes. For some this has been a blessing in disguise, but for many the isolation, loneliness, loss of employment, fear and, in some cases, illness have left them far from home even while living at home. We truly are a people who need God’s comfort and understanding heart.

As the Prophet Isaiah offers comfort to God’s people, his words are meant to bring us comfort as well. The challenges, hardships and uncertainties of an exiled life are clearly within God’s understanding. Even more, they are in the DNA of God’s very people.

God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah, encouraging His people not to give up, but instead to know and trust God’s comfort and promise.

Isaiah goes on to say, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her service is at an end...” The comforting good news is that their exile is coming to a close. God is restoring them and will bring them back home to Jerusalem. All the road blocks to restoration are being dealt with. The mountains are being brought low, the valleys raised up, and the rough places smoothed out. God is making a way for Israel to return. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people will see it.

Moreover, the prophet proclaims, “Go up on to a high mountain, Zion, herald of glad tidings; cry out at the top of your voice, Jerusalem, herald of good news! Fear not to cry out and say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God! The Lord God comes with power... Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care.”

These words of promise and victory and the image of God leading his people as a shepherd gently takes care of his flock are meant to speak additional comfort and peace to the Hebrew people. God will have the last word.

Thus, this vision is not only comforting, it is meant to inspire trust and hope as well. For God knows that while the people will return to Jerusalem, their true and eternal victory was far from realized. In fact, upon returning to Jerusalem, the people would find their homes in ruins and their temple destroyed.

The people needed God's comfort and hope for their journey was far from over. While their exile had ended, they remained in the "in-between" time, in-between promise and fulfillment.

We too live in the "in-between" times: in-between promise and fulfillment; in-between sin and victory; in-between life and death, joy and sorrow, insight and confusion, light and darkness, blindness and sight, sickness and health; in-between COVID and life after COVID.

I remember climbing Mt. Rainer when I was in college. Looking up, near the top of the mountain, I kept thinking, "You're almost there, this is it!" Only to find out it wasn't the summit, but another ridge or false summit. Again, I would gather my strength to continue the climb. We encountered several "false summits" before we finally arrived at the top of the mountain, Hallelujah!

We live in-between the many and various ridges and false summits of our lives. Maybe a better word for "false summit" would be "partial summit". We have many partial summits in our lives. These are various victories along the journey of faith that point us to the one eternal victory when Christ will come back to make all things new. These partial summits like the news of the end of the Babylonian exile are meant to comfort us and encourage us along the journey.

Advent is a time to be comforted by God's promises and to refix our attention on the goal and promise of our faith, Jesus Christ's glorious return. While we prepare to celebrate Jesus' humble birth and receive once again the glorious words of the angel, "I bring you good news of a great joy," our ultimate joy is God's final victory when Christ will return in all His glory. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death will be no more.

It came to my attention this week that the word “Gospel” means more than Good News. When Mark begins his Gospel with the words we read this morning, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God,” Mark means for us to understand “Gospel” in its fullest and contextual sense. According to Rory Coony, Mark appropriated the word “Gospel” from Roman Civil religion. “Gospel was a word used in the Roman empire to describe the victory of the emperor or one of his generals over his enemies.” In addition, the title “Son of God” was also used of emperors in their quest to be worshipped. Thus, Mark begins his Gospel with the clear and unequivocal pronouncement that Jesus Christ is the true victor. Victory and worship belong to Christ alone.

Mark then points us back to Isaiah’s prophecy regarding “a voice crying out in the wilderness.” John the Baptist fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy and became another vital “partial summit” on the journey.

Thank God we live on this side of Jesus’ first coming. By the grace of God we live in-between Jesus’ first victory (His birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost) and Jesus’ second victory when He will come again in all His glory.

Living in-between the two great victories of Jesus, we can live in the comfort, hope and promise that God is with us always, Christ has defeated the Enemy through his death and resurrection, and Christ will come again.

Advent is a time for us to embrace God’s comfort. Advent invites us to spend more intentional time in God’s presence - to spend intentional time with God who is with us and to feel God’s spiritual embrace and tender love. It is also an opportunity for us to find comfort in the many and vital “partial summits” of God’s Word and of our lives, refixing our attention and trust in God.

Do not lose heart. Trust in God’s comfort and promises. Thank God for all the “partial summits” that have led you this far and will continue to be sources of comfort and strength as you wait in hope for the coming and final victory of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Advent Hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel “ speaks of our waiting in the “in-between” or exile of our lives:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here.
Until the Son of God appears.
Rejoice, rejoice. Emmanuel.
Shall come to thee, O Israel.”

Truly, Jesus will come again. Truly, we can rejoice for God is with us. In the “in-between” time may we comfort one another, trust God and find strength and courage for the journey. The victory has been won!

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve