



December 6, 2020

Comfort, Comfort My People

Rev. Dr. Craig Lindsey

Someone asked the other day "Are you okay? When you first arrived you were smiling all the time, and lately you have had the weight of the world on your shoulders." To be candid, I love having been Called as being a Pastor, Your Pastor; but this year has been hard on all of us. Every person who has been exposed, everyone who has been Quarantined, let alone Positive for the Virus, every death whether from COVID or not, Pastor Diane and I (on behalf of God) carry in our prayers.

"Comfort, comfort my people says your God!" This morning being the second week of Advent, the Theme of the 2nd Candle is LOVE, but this is not the Hallmark Channel or Valentine's Day kind-of-"Love"; this is neither Infatuation, Lust, nor a Wedding Vow kind-of-Love. The Love of Advent is a love that recognizes and owns we have been hurt in relationships, in this relationship, the cost of commitment is greater than anyone ever imagined, and yet even so we wait for Love.

As horrible as this International Pandemic has been so far: 9 months of havoc; 1.5 Million having died, 65 Million having been infected, with many having permanent scarring to their lungs, the Elimination of small businesses and complications to the World Economy, doubt, suspicion and distrust; Yet I believe the worst part has been the "Open-Endedness" that there has been no control over stopping the disease. Someone greeted me before Thanksgiving, frustrated that we prayed for Doctors and Nurses and Scientists, but not for God to just End This! We entered this pandemic assuming that like a Cold or Flu, it would last several days or a few weeks, some estimated Easter, Mother's Day or by 4th of July, before Thanksgiving or after Christmas; dependent upon verification of a Vaccine and a majority of people being willing to receive the Vaccine, by next Summer. Then this week, a reassuring word was offered **"Comfort, comfort my people says your God"** next week they will begin vaccinating in England then in waves across the United States beginning with the most vulnerable.

The first 39 Chapters of Isaiah assume the People of God were being punished, and this pandemic has felt like having all privileges taken away and being Grounded.

Either our God was not as Strong as the God of the Assyrians and Babylonians; this evil disease; or the People of God had not loved God, making God our priority, as we should.

In the Call of Isaiah back in Chapter 6, with Seraphim crying out "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord!" and Isaiah saying "Here Am I Send Me!" God had commissioned Isaiah stating the Preacher would preach and preach, but the people's ears would be too fat to listen, their necks too stiff to turn, their hearts too hard to care, it seemed all HOPE for our world was lost! AND over decades the Assyrians had torn down Israel's walls, carrying off or killing everyone in the Northern 10 Tribes of Israel, leaving only Judah and Benjamin. Then came the plague of Babylon, who after destroying Judah's economy, after taking the brightest and best, the most educated, healthiest and most capable into Exile, destroyed the glorious Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem until not one stone was not left upon another.

Those in Babylon, were no longer allowed to practice their faith, they were not allowed to speak Hebrew, the people of Israel were not allowed to live their cultural heritage, the people of God were not permitted to Worship God or sacrifice for their sins. The Book of Daniel challenges whether the royalty, the most educated and affluent, as exiles in Babylon could keep Kosher. Their exile lasted not days or weeks or a decade, but Generations!

Then, only in contrast, this good news comes in Chapter 40. **Comfort, comfort my people says your God.** The answer is not that our God was not as strong as the Babylonians. The answer ultimately was not about whether we believed enough or sacrificed enough. A totally different message is sent here: God loves you! God loves so much, God enters in and God redeems. Not because we deserved, or because we were worth it, but because of God's Love. **Comfort, Comfort my people says your God.**

When I was first ordained, on the first day of ministering to a solo pastor Church I learned that one of our parishioners was in the State Hospital, so I naively went to visit to listen and pray. Except when I arrived for a straight forward pastoral call, I was taken to the Psychiatric Lock-down ward. This parishioner was not having Gall Bladder or Heart surgery, not recovering from an infection, they had been arrested by a warrant from their spouse as being dangerous to themselves and others, to make matters worse, while being hospitalized the spouse was so hurt they had filed for divorce and his sole custody of their children. She was alone and abandoned, helpless and hopeless. The Prophet Hosea describes a similar circumstance, where like God the prophet has sent his spouse away, EXCEPT... God and the Prophet Hosea each recognize their love is so much a part of the identity of God, they cannot let the other go. Despite all that has taken place, they redeem the other, which tells us little about the spouse and a great deal about God's character. **Comfort, Comfort my people says your God.**

The impossible responsibilities many of us face: is having to make decisions for our partner, the one we love more than life itself. And the worst part comes after making decisions, when they do have a good day, we want to make the long-term realities go away. But the decisions are in no way punishment, as hard as making decisions for another is, this is a demonstration of LOVE. This is completely different from a circumstance of abandonment! Providing long-term care for our loved-one, similar to God in Isaiah 40, is ACTING OUT LOVE, acting to provide the very best we could for them, knowing their needs are greater than we/ourselves can provide personally for them. Both this, and God's redemption in Isaiah 40 are revelations of LOVE, love that cares more about the other than what we know we could provide. **Comfort, Comfort my people says your God."**

The beauty of Isaiah 40 is that the voice of GOD turns PAST Tense into FUTURE tense. We know that these words were spoken through the Prophet Isaiah, thousands of years ago, describing the historic reality that God had used Persia to conquer Babylon, and Babylon's Prisoners of War (Israel) had been set free. AND YET, by inclusion of Isaiah 40 within the Canon of Scripture: that which was, becomes the future tense of the World. That Voice in the Wilderness crying out that: **We Will** PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, **IF** WE MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD, When we LIFT UP EVERY VALLEY, BRINGING LOW EVERY MOUNTAIN. By simply having been stated in the future tense, all of this is no longer Past, but represents a different and new future possibility, where we are not isolated in exile but we are loved by God.

Verses 6-11 seem like a response of helplessness quoted from the Book of Ecclesiastes: "A Voice in the Wilderness cries Vanity of Vanities, all people are concerned with is vanity! The grass withers, the flower fades." The voice says "CRY!" And I said "What shall I cry?"

The people of God, exiled in Babylon looked for the juxtaposition of "a Conquering Warrior God"

who would “tenderly gather them like lost sheep”.

1000 years after Isaiah’s prophecy, John the Baptist quoted these very words, regarding believers during the Empire of Roman Caesars: “The Voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord.” The Voices responded “What shall we do?” Instead of being that Military challenge to Caesar, John called people to the subversive act of Baptism, renouncing their Sins and Affirming the Lordship of God.

We today are in an Empire where competition is on steroids, where instead of “going shopping” our consumerism has been brought into our homes, where simple means of communication and relationship have allowed us to become impatient wanting everything faster and faster under our control. God seems beyond the stars in a separate heaven, unsoiled by the sins of our lives. How can we believe God could enter in?

According to this passage from Mark, when Jesus was baptized the Heavens opened, the gulf between us breached. What would the sound of Heaven opening sound like? A simple Pop? No, the Scriptures describe Heaven being RIPPED open! When God rips open the heavens to come down, that does not sound like something that can be pasted back together.

Comfort, Comfort my people says your God: God is on the loose in our world!