

Comfort to the Afflicted

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Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
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John the Baptist arrives right off the bat in the Gospel of Mark, appearing in the wilderness, clothed in camel's hair, eating bugs, and growling at us to "Prepare the way of the Lord." Welcome to the 2nd week of Advent. What we can see, when we read Isaiah 40 – the source text for John's own wilderness cry – is that 'preparing the way of the Lord,' what we are doing during Advent, always happens in situations where the world has been turned upside down. I don't entirely understand why there is such a close affinity between the coming presence of the Lord and situations of vulnerable difficulty. But biblically speaking, it is when worlds have been shattered that preparing the way of the Lord becomes urgent.

Isaiah 40 was written in the mid-6th century BCE to devastated Jews who had been plucked up from their homeland in Jerusalem and deported into exile in Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem – the theological center of their universe, the place where the holy presence of God could be reliably experienced and encountered in merciful and transformative ways – had been burned and destroyed by the brutal, totalizing forces of the Babylonian Imperial army in the year 587. The exiles' world had been shattered. Their lives had been traumatized, and the predictable institutions of their world had been toppled.

That's the happy world that you have walked into this morning.

The only good news about that is that it doesn't take a lot of imagination to think of circumstances in our own lives, situations in our own time, where we may feel something akin to what the exiles of Isaiah 40 were experiencing. Now, we have to be thoughtful here, because our lives as followers of Jesus in Northern Virginia in 2023 are very different from the lives of Jews in the mid-6th century BCE. But when you sit long enough with biblical texts, and when you open up your own heart, especially when you become conscious of your own vulnerabilities, it is astonishing how frequently you can sense a resonance between the circumstances of different characters in the biblical story and your own.

In our world and in our own lives – as in ancient Israel - worlds get shattered, predictable institutions get toppled, and brutalizing force intrudes into people's lives, *all the time*. The redemptive and transformative word of the Bible is characteristically written into situations where the world has been turned upside down, and so whenever we sense that our own worlds are being shaken, we may expect the Bible to speak a transformative word of summons to us. In all kinds of situations.

Dr. Gay Byron, a New Testament scholar at Howard Divinity School in DC, a leader in National Capital Presbytery, and a dear friend of many in our presbytery, including my wife Laura, died suddenly this past week, and when the email went out about it, you could hear the sound of worlds shattering. Others of you have lost loved ones recently, some that came as a complete shock, others in ways that were expected. Allison Lineberger's mom, Betty Gordon, died this week. Divorce may come to a loved one and the dream of a relationship ends; someone close to you loses a job or a business venture doesn't work out.

Worlds get shattered.

This past week, I was talking to a rabbi friend from New York, whose synagogue is grappling with the grief and pain from Israel's current war with Hamas, as they have been dealing for some time with a rise in anti-semitic incidents in schools and the wider community. He was telling me, with a catch in his voice, that they have installed bullet-proof glass in the windows of the preschool in their synagogue, to protect their children. It's breaking his heart.

Elsewhere in that conflict, a leader of the UN World Food Programme has said that in Gaza right now, because of the air strikes, as much as half of the population there is starving, and 9 out of 10 people cannot eat every day. Conditions there have made deliveries of humanitarian supplies almost impossible. He said that nothing had prepared him for "the fear, the chaos, and the despair" that he and his team have encountered there.¹

The pain of the situation there – pain and trauma and memories and fears and resentments that go back generations – does not admit of any simplistic understanding or explanation, no matter how hard we may try to force such an explanation, and my own sense is that *the pain simply cries out to be witnessed*. When worlds get shattered, the pain demands to be witnessed.

When worlds shatter, one option is to fall into despair and want to give up; another is to fall into rage and want to blame somebody, or kill somebody, for all the things we have lost. But those aren't the only ways it can go. Isaiah 40 and John the Baptist in Mark 1 beckon us to a third path, and friends, it is more important than ever that we listen to follow them. Isaiah 40 and John the Baptist summon us to the path of *comfort*. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

"Comfort" is quickly becoming one of my favorite words for the ministry of the church, and that's largely because my understanding of the word is changing. This past Wednesday, when our Wednesday Bible study had our monthly gathering with our friends from Shiloh Baptist Church, Dan Thomas observed that the word 'comfort'

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67670679>

actually means “to strengthen,” which I had not noticed. I am embarrassed to admit that that had not occurred to me. I tended to think of ‘comfort’ in one of two ways, neither of which is very helpful. On the one hand, I thought about ‘comfort’ as basically being given back everything you’ve lost. After all, I thought, that’s what would bring you comfort. And if getting back what you’ve lost is not possible, then there’s just no comfort to be had.

On the other hand, I thought of ‘comfort’ as a rather timid word, where you’d sit beside someone who’s having a hard time and just say, “There, there.” What I forgot is how comforting it actually was to have my mom do exactly that when I was scared as a little boy. This is a *ministry of presence*. When we do this, when we really *see* someone, when we are not afraid of their pain, when we come alongside them in their pain, it always lends strength to the person. This strengthening effect is right there in the word ‘comfort’ itself. The word breaks down into -fort, the root of the word ‘fortify,’ and the prefix ‘com-’ which means “with.” So ‘comfort’ is a strengthening that you are given *with* another person.

And “comfort” is the path that God provides. God announces “comfort” to exiled Israel. God announces “comfort” to families and friends who are grieving the death of a loved one. God announces “comfort” to people in a war zone. God announces ‘comfort’ to people who are being persecuted. And God summons the church to practice this ministry of bringing comfort to the afflicted.

The way we do this is by bearing witness to their pain. We notice it, we feel it, we move towards it, we recognize and affirm it as real; we do not try to run away from it, we do not try to make it go away or tell people what they should do about it or explain to them why they’re having it. All of those things – which may be done with the best of intentions – are ways for us to avoid feeling the loss and the pain ourselves. And that just adds to the isolating nature of the hurt.

Instead, we can bear witness to it with the ones who are suffering, whether we are with – to use the metaphorical language of Isaiah 40 – someone who is in a vulnerable and lonely “valley” that is being lifted up, or someone who is on an arrogant “mountain” that is being brought low, for there is pain in that, too, a different kind of pain, but pain nonetheless.

Friends, are you willing to bear witness to the pain and the sorrows of your loved ones and neighbors? Just to be with them, not to try and put a happy ending on their sorrows, just to be with them in the middle of whatever they’re going through?

Is the church willing to be present in situations like the conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, or the polarizing hostilities within and between our domestic political parties, or the pain of the earth itself in the midst of soil degradation and water pollution? All of these situations need people who are working to solve the problems,

but these problems are so deep, that it may be that what they need just as much, if not more, are people who are simply willing to bear witness to the hurt, to really see and appreciate the pain. It may well be that these people, the ones who are willing to bear witness, will be the ones who really bring true comfort to those who are afflicted, who strengthen the wounded ones, and who prepare the way for the Lord to come with healing power. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.