Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

December 6, 2020

*“Be comforted”*

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The reading we just heard is a poem of compassion offered to a people who had lost a war to the Babylonians, and had been carried off into captivity. There, in Babylon for almost five decades, the people had known only the scolding and blame of the first thirty-nine chapters of this book of Isaiah. The Isaiah they knew was the prophet who had spoken only words of condemnation and reproach to the Israelites who had languished in captivity far from home.

Now, however, Isaiah has a new voice as the words he is being given to share with the Jerusalemites has turned away from the hot anger and disappointment of the earlier chapters to expressions of forgiveness and comfort.

*1Comfort, O comfort my people,*  *says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
   and cry to her
that she has served her term,
   that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
   double for all her sins.*

This poem of grace and gentleness is God’s voice. God has called together the heavenly host—that is: all of the angels in heaven like the ones who were present at Jesus’ birth. And now, God is instructing them on the new way they are to treat the exiles. Instead of the anger and disappointment of old, God’s voice is the voice of consolation.

It is important to note that the people had done nothing to deserve this new-found compassion. It was God whose heart had turned back to the love God has always had for the people. After a period of anger, God has chosen, once again, to renew God’s relationship and communion with human beings. And so, a new chapter of peace was begun between God and the people.

We hear it now (on this Second Sunday of Advent) because it made a huge impression on the New Testament Gospel writers. They remembered that moment in the history of Israel and God. To them, it was very much like what had happened when God blessed humankind with the birth of Jesus.

A new chapter between God and humanity was begun. A new and bold generosity was sweeping into the world—just like the new words of comfort and nurture had been a sudden and bold change in the days of Isaiah, as we hear him here in chapter 40.

That is why all four Gospel writers have echoes of this passage in their books about Jesus. They used Isaiah’s words to convey what was in their time a similar instance of what was a wholly unexpected, unearned, and unprecedented act of divine compassion—the entrance of Jesus onto the worlds stage.

In trying to describe an indescribable act of grace, they turned to this passage from Isaiah to communicate this new experience of God’s love. Like Isaiah, they were deeply moved by the fact that it was God and God alone who restored the relationship between humans and God. And it is an amazing act of grace that God does this even as God acknowledges the human condition when Isaiah records:

*All people are grass,
   their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
   when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
   surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
   but the word of our God will stand for ever.*

In effect and in practice, God has again demonstrated what is the most important part of life. Whether divine or human, God shows us that what is most important is to be at peace with one another; to being reconciled with one another.

Relationship is so important that God will remove every obstacle from between us—even the sins of the human creature, and God’s righteous anger over them. Moreover, God acknowledges humankind’s fragile and inconsistent faithfulness—that is not as important as being in relationship with one another.

This is what we are seeing in the passage from Isaiah. God is reuniting with the human community even though it is obvious to God that we are more than likely to disappoint and go astray again.

God, however, will continue to be our God. Indeed, God will be like a warrior but also a shepherd—which is to say: the care and attention we receive will be like a mighty force always with us and within us—all of this because ours is a God who will not let us go; who will not abandon us, no matter what happens.

This promise of constant care does not prevent us from living human lives. We are not promised that all suffering and sorrow will come to an end. What we are promised is that we will never be without the one resource we need most of all. God’s love will always be our closest companion and most valuable and faithful resource.

The first people to hear this declaration were also told something equally as wonderful and as surprising. They were told that God was not going to wait until all was ready; God was coming upon them right then, right there!

True, they were to make the road royal ready for God, but the suggestion is that—ready or not—God was on the way. Indeed, no amount of wilderness was going to stop or slow God from a steady progress with and within the human community.

Ours is a God who travels; who lifts up valleys and levels mountains so that God’s purpose and progress toward us will continue unabated.

What is most important to hear in this passage is the reason for God’s pilgrimage toward us. Isaiah records that God comes to release us from bondage in Babylon, and also to that which caused the bondage: the sinful ways of the people.

God is going to deliver us from everything that keeps us from being free to receive and to offer love—especially God’s love. Just like the escape from Egypt, God is bringing our captivity to an end. Which is to say: God’s involvement in our lives is going to create a new future.

Of course, just as the conclusion of a prison term does not, by itself, result in a better tomorrow. The end of the Babylonian period does not ensure that what lies ahead will be any different for the exiles. But for their sake—and for *our* sake—God chooses to be involved in that future.

The deepest comfort and greatest joy is the power of God at work in our midst, providing, protecting and guiding us with gentleness (verses 10-11). True comfort, indeed, and a way toward peace in our context, too.

So, this is who God is: God is the one who brings peace to the relationship we have with God and with each other. This is why Jesus will also come to be known as the Prince of Peace. It is because God desires peace between us and God sent Jesus to make that peace, to make that happen.

When we turn back to the words we have heard today from Isaiah, I hope what inspires in all of us is the calm assurance that we are loved; that we have a God who will always make a way for humankind to come back into close relationship—who will always desire that we know comfort.

Now, this has been a very uncomfortable year, and so this is an important message that I sincerely hope all of us will hear and embrace. I hope you will think to yourself, and take into prayer, what you need to feel comforted and strong, because this is what God wants to give you.

I also hope we will all think of the many ways we have been given to offer comfort to others during this very uncomfortable year. How might we bring peace to one another and our neighbors?

Last Sunday, I saw an amazing amount of food being brought to here to our church. It was a wonderful sight. That was the picture of peace for many families—the peace of knowing they will not be hungry, that their children will not be hungry.

Friends, our God is a God who brings peace into our lives and praise that we will turn and do likewise and bring peace into each other’s lives. So I invite you to immerse yourself fully in God’s gift of love and relationship. I invite you to be comforted. Amen.