

Rest In Peace
Isaiah 40.1-11 (ff)
December 6, 2020, Advent II
Rev. Tim Phillips



If you heard the sermon last Sunday by Pastor Sam Kim, in our joint Advent service with Japanese and Mt. Zion Baptist churches, you heard a powerful word from Mark 13 and Romans 8 about how this season should be a season of disruption. We should be ripping off those comfy blankets of indifference and complacency that keep us from being awake to that which can save us.

Advent, he said, is not about comfort. It is about disruption.

I agree with Pastor Kim.

So, imagine my frustration when the passage for this Second Sunday in Advent is: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God,” from Isaiah 40.

Is there, or should there be, a kind of comfort that will not lull us back to sleep?

Isaiah 40 is its own kind of wake-up call. “A voice cries out ... lift up your eyes on high and see.” If you were hoping for a snooze button, this isn’t it.

This comfort Isaiah is talking about isn’t shutting our eyes for just a few more minutes. It’s about getting up and moving forward in the peace that comes from knowing what it is we trust.

One of the things that happens when our lives get disrupted is that we lose track of what we can trust. Everything is shifting and we have trouble recognizing the world. So, we become anxious and sleepless and exhausted because we don’t know where to hang our hopes or how to hold on to the truth.

And we certainly have a truth crisis right now. And that makes knowing what to trust even harder.

Isaiah is speaking from that same kind of disruption. And he doesn’t want to put people to sleep. What he is offering is the peace that comes from trusting something greater than themselves.

Now I have to say that I think Isaiah 40 is better sung than read. If there are any *Messiah* fans out there, you know what I mean.

And, by the way, one of our Choral Interns, Jared White, will be leading a discussion on Handel’s *Messiah* on Wednesday, December 16, at 7:30. I’m not going to miss it.

Because here's the thing: of the 42 pieces of music that reference biblical texts in *Messiah*, 21 of them are from Isaiah and 5 of those are from Isaiah 40.

Handel wrote the music but it was Charles Jennens who collected the texts from the King James version of the Bible and from the Book of Common Prayer. And I am going to read parts of Isaiah 40.1-11 from the libretto of *Messiah*.

Feel free to sing along.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, says your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned.

“That her warfare is accomplished and her iniquity is pardoned.”

Part of the disruption we are experiencing right now is that we are a nation at war with itself. Differences of opinions are one thing. But how can it be that there are death threats aimed at people who are simply doing their job to count votes? How can it be that evangelical Christians who taught me to read the Bible and to love Jesus, cannot see that their rhetoric and their actions violently betray the way of Jesus? How is it that, after 400 years of slavery and 250 years of claiming that “all people are created equal,” we still harbor violence against people of color and defend the structures of white supremacy?

We are not simply divided. We are at war with one another and sometimes with our own selves.

This is December 6 and that makes tomorrow December 7 and the commemoration of the attack on Pearl Harbor. I always try to imagine what it was like for our pastor Dr. Harold Jensen in 1941 to remain a public voice for pacifism with the news of that attack. I wonder what it took for him to stand in our pulpit to cry out against the internment of Japanese-Americans. And then, after the war, to speak out against those gangs that were forming to keep the returning Japanese out, saying instead that we should stand at the edges of this city and cry out “welcome home.”

Like Isaiah, I can see him trying to comfort the people of this city, not by letting them fall under the self-satisfied spell of “victory,” but crying out: Your warfare is accomplished and your iniquity is pardoned!

And I can't imagine that Dr. Jensen could do any of that without trusting – without some unrelenting confidence that peace and reconciliation are possible?

Perhaps he was like that other voice in Isaiah 40:

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the dessert a highway for our God.

This, of course, gets picked up as the voice of John the Baptist in the gospels. And, as Pastor Sam said last week, John was a bizarre character with a “severe” message about repentance.

But John also trusted that forgiveness was possible. And just to make sure people got it, he baptized them in the Jordan River – at that very place where it all began - as a way of saying: Ok, you got off-track; but if you change your ways, you can start again; don’t give up, trust that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible.

Because, right here in Isaiah, the tenor sings:

Ev’ry valley shall be exalted, and ev’ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

I’ve heard people in the African American church say: “God can make a way out of no way.” And I have every reason to trust them.

This “comfort” Isaiah is speaking about is the peace that comes from trusting that reconciliation is possible; that peace is possible; that no matter how many failures, you can start again; that, even if you can’t see it right now, there is a way out of no way.

And that brings on a chorus:

And the glory – the glory - of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together [not the privileged few; not just a certain kind of people who look just like me; not just my tribe or nation] all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

You can count on it, Isaiah says.

Now between that chorus and the next one, there are other verses that didn’t quite make it into the libretto. But they are important too. There is “the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness” in verse 3. And there is another voice in verse 6:

*A voice says, ‘Cry out!’
And I said, “What shall I cry?’
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades ...
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Now the message that people are like grass that withers and the flower that fades might not sound like something to celebrate. But guess what comes down the line in *Messiah* from Isaiah 40? It’s an alto solo and another chorus:

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God!

I'm not sure what is so good about these "tidings" that humans are limited even if the word of God stands forever. There is a lot of work to do and most of the time I wonder who else I can trust to do it?

And it's at this point, we get one of the most lovely duets in all the *Messiah* from Isaiah 40.11:

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

And then Jennens does this brilliant thing. He pairs these words with Matthew 11. And the Soprano comes in:

Come unto to Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him that are heavy laden, and he will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you and learn of Him, for he is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

Rebecca Ann Parker says that, "at the beginning of the 20th century [we had] the belief that the time had come when the whole world would be transformed into the hoped-for realm of God." *For many of us, she says, the confidence that we ourselves can build heaven on earth has been the essence of liberating faith. We recognize that we are not just pawns of fate; that everything is not pre-determined by God; that we are the agents of history ...*

But our will-centered religion comes to a crisis. We discover that the world does not appear to be any better off after two hundred years of social activism ... On a personal level, many of us come to a life crisis that forces us to face the fact that there is something broken in this world ... [that] for all our ingenuity, commitment, and genius, we cannot fix. We come up against our helplessness, the inability to stop loved ones from dying, or turn our children from paths of self-destruction, or keep riots from happening. Sometimes we can't even get our own churches to be places where people are civil to one another ... [And] We may find ourselves asking ... "Is there anything I can trust beyond our power to make it right? Or must I hope just in this: that if we work hard enough, maybe things will be okay?"

That's a hope tinged with tremendous sadness and tiredness, she says, and it is very difficult to sustain.

I can hear Isaiah saying that no matter how good humans want to be and no matter how hard they work, they are still like grass that withers and flowers that fade. And If we trust only in ourselves, our hope will be tinged with tremendous sadness and tiredness.

But be not afraid, Isaiah says. There is a song for that. "And he shall feed his flock like a shepherd and shall gather the lambs with his arm ... Come unto Him all you that labour and are heavy laden and he will give you rest.

"We have to choose whom we will trust in this life," Rebecca Ann Parker says, "we are sustained in our work for justice by the depth of our trust – not our fear, or grief, or will – but our trust."

The voices in Isaiah offer a “comfort” that is peace born of that which we trust: trusting that reconciliation and peace itself is possible; trusting that no matter your failures, you can start again; trusting that, even if you can’t see it right now, there is a way out of no way; and perhaps most important, trusting that it’s not all about you.

Isaiah 40 ends with another song – a more contemporary one:

*those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

And today, beloved ones, if you hear that voice, trust it. And do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The libretto of *Messiah* can be found at opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/messiah.htm. Rebecca Ann Parker, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* (Skinner House Books, 2006), pp.107-112. “On Eagle’s Wings,” Michael Joncas.