

## Consolation and Peace

How many of you have ever had a dream that was so vivid that you remembered for days afterward or even longer? Did it make sense to you right away or did any meaning that you took from it come after you'd mused over it for a while? Was the dream logical and sequential or did you have to rearrange it in your mind to assign any sense to it? I ask these questions because I suspect that the prophets' mystical experiences of the presence of God must have been a good deal like our dreams. I look particularly at our passage from Isaiah this morning and I find in it a rush of images, many of them familiar and all of them powerful, and while I sense a theme or a through-line to all of them, I find that I can only move their lessons from the realm of image and metaphor to the realm of teaching by rearranging them. So if you'll bear with a little Bible hopscotch this morning, I hope I can unlock from these beautiful and well-known words their message for us of true peace in troubled times.

If you were to sit down and read the entire book of Isaiah at one sitting, you might well notice that there seems to be at least one and possibly two distinct shifts in focus and tone. Most scholars believe that what we have as the Book of Isaiah is the work of two or three prophets – one who warned the people of Judah about the possible consequences of their failure to follow God's word, one who spoke to them of hope in their suffering in exile, and possibly a third who encouraged them upon their return to Jerusalem. Our passage this morning is the opening of what those scholars call Second Isaiah and the very first word in this Isaiah's message is a directive from God that will shape the prophet's entire output: Comfort.

We need to remember that at the time of Second Isaiah, God's people are in a bad way. Their nation has been conquered by the Babylonians. Their capitol city and their center of worship, the home of their God, have been destroyed. Their leaders have been killed or captured and now the majority of the people have been forcibly marched from their land across hundreds of miles of rugged terrain and desert only to become slaves in their new home. Is it any wonder that God gives the command to God's servants, "Comfort my people. Console them. Let them know that I have not forgotten them, that I am still on their side."

It was important and it is important for God's people to hear that God does not forget us, that the word and the promises of God will stand forever. There are not many promises, not many things of any sort in our lives that last forever. Upon receiving his charge, Isaiah ruefully remarks, "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." When I first read that verse in our NRSV, it fell strangely on my ear. Somewhere along the way, I'd gotten used to the translation, "All flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field." Certainly in our culture, we're used to dealing with the idea of beauty that fades like dying flowers. Our cosmetics industry and plastic surgeons depend on that perception for their rather lucrative livelihoods. But Isaiah's point, though it may include transitory beauty, is quite different. The Hebrew word translated variously here as beauty or constancy is *hesed*, a word normally associated with God and translated as mercy or loving-kindness. I think Isaiah is here reflecting on what has gotten his people into the mess they are in, what God is referring to in the directive to "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." For like all people, Israel and we do lack the constancy, the continual mercy and loving-kindness to love God with all our hearts and minds and strength or to always love our neighbors as ourselves. "We do have our moments of dedication," Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, "[B]ut our faithfulness is like the

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flower of the field, beautiful at the moment but rapidly failing when trouble and distraction come upon us.” But if “our response is inconsistent, fleeting, and undependable, no matter what we promise or intend,” as Kate Huey writes on this passage, “God is persistent, faithful, and dependable. . . . The prophet reassures us of God’s “anyway” love for us: we sin, but we can count on God’s faithfulness anyway, on the Word of God that ‘will stand forever.’”

If our best intentions are fleeting, so too are the troubles we take so to heart. Now, don’t shout it out, but how many of you recognize the significance of today’s date? Sixty-seven years ago, also a Sunday, this was considered “a date which will live in infamy -- the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” But despite the immediate shock and years of repercussions, the date is slowly fading from our corporate memory. Bruce Epperly writes, “Days of infamy happen over and over again in our world, whether on 9/11, in the torture and water boarding of prisoners, and in the impact of unbridled corporate greed on the USA’s most vulnerable persons. Nations rise and fall; our lives are brief, punctuated by the interplay of celebration and sorrow, flourishing and diminishing. But, even amid the decline of empires, the diminishing of retirement investments, and our own obvious mortality, God stands firm, ‘the word of God will stand forever.’”

As Epperly notes, we are like grass in another way as well. Our days, when compared to the forever of God, are short. This may seem frightening or unfair but when we take seriously the faithful love of God for us we can find peace, shalom, the sense of well-being even in the valley of the shadow of death. Many of you, I’m sure, will remember that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the very night before he was assassinated, spoke of his lack of fear, of his peace, in the face of death threats, previous murder attempts and his own mortality: “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!”

I was reminded of the peace that comes from God even in the face of death when I got an e-mail this past Monday night from a dear friend. My friend Lee Walker worked with me 15 years ago in Houston. Twelve years ago, he discovered he was HIV positive. His letter to me this week was the reprint of a posting he’d done on the website of the Gay Christian Network. He hopes that by sharing his story, he’ll pave the way towards comfort for other brothers and sisters in his situation. In remembering his difficult journey after diagnosis, he writes, “I was a gay man who was trusting Christ’s finished work on the cross to bring me into full relationship with God. Now I was also a gay man with AIDS who was literally trusting God for health day by day. And for the first time in my life I realized God truly did love me as I was. I had thought “change” meant making me straight. But I now believe what God meant by change was the healing of my heart from one of self-hatred and shame to a heart of joy and gratitude and worship. I began to learn how to receive Christ’s forgiveness and to finally forgive myself. The sense of freedom and peace was unbelievable.”

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As I think of Lee's trust in God and the sense of peace that it has brought him, I'm taken back to Isaiah and one of the enduring images of peace that we find in his writing. "(God) will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." It's a wonderful image of love and peace and it belongs in the same vision of the future as a verse just above, "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together." In this world where glory is so often connected with feats of strength, with armies and with military might and the flash of metal that has been forged into weapons, I'm so glad that Isaiah's vision of the glory of the Lord comes down to the gentle and caring One who will embrace and tend and nurture. Writing for *Sojourners* magazine, Kari Jo Verhulst says, "Isaiah's promise of comfort and tenderness comes as a great relief. No matter how lost we might be, despite how fragile and fleeting we are, God will come and gather us in his arms... God comes, again and again, because that is who God is; God seeks and finds us, again and again, because that is how God is. This love is impossible to behold, and cannot be grasped, for it is God's very self. Our inconstancy—as short-lived as the grass and flowers of the field—cannot change God, nor alter God's love, which compels but does not coerce us toward receiving it."

God gave Isaiah the image of the loving Shepherd who will come and gather the sheep as a part of equipping him to follow the command, "Comfort my people!" God's people, exiled, enslaved, frightened, needed consolation and peace then. God's people, facing economic meltdown, wars all over the world, disease and hunger, need peace and consolation now. Perhaps that is why part of Isaiah's vision was the call to prepare the way of God beginning in the wilderness. There is certainly a sense that we are walking through the wilderness now, through the dangerous and windswept part of life, when our thirst for peace leaves us susceptible to mirage, when the very forces of God's creation seem arrayed against us. We have all known wilderness times in our lives, even if we are insulated from the winds that howl against others now. Reading an internet community bulletin board this week, I found a thread lamenting that a well-known, much respected member had been laid off with no warning this week. There were a number of posts decrying that such a thing should happen during the holiday season. It reminded me of a wilderness time in my own life, in 1991, when I got the word on the day before Thanksgiving that I was to be laid off at the end of the year. Just weeks later, we realized that Connie was pregnant. That was a scary, wilderness time. But it always seems that the building of our highways to God's future begin in the wilderness. In our case, that wilderness time led us to a place that was safe for us for a time, where our careers and our personal lives moved ahead and prepared our spirits for the next wilderness time. In the wilderness, we found that the way towards God's future for us had been prepared.

The promise that there is a way out of the wilderness towards the nurturing arms of our Good Shepherd carries a commission with it as well. After all, God's word is not "Come to the wilderness and find a way" but "in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Bruce Epperly, who, by the way, is professor of practical theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, writes, "We are not passive observers of God's vision of shalom. A voice calls out: "in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." Could this voice be God's call to the people... to move them from passivity to action, to hear God's voice and then respond with acts of justice and healing, reflecting God's vision of shalom, justice, and hospitality?" As we hear the word of God to Isaiah, "Comfort my people! Console my people!"

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and as we consider the theme of this Advent Sunday of Peace, perhaps we should hear again the words of St. Francis of Assisi, who prayed, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace... grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console...” For those of us who lift the cup and eat the bread of Jesus, there is always the call to love and to serve our neighbors, just as we would do for Jesus himself. Let us prepare our hearts, even though they may be in the wilderness, to carry the Good News of our glorious, loving God to all who need peace and consolation in these dark and troubled times.