

WATCHING FOR GOD

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Take a deep breath and let those words sink in for a moment. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Breathe. Let these words that come to us across the centuries, which have spoken to countless people of faith over the eons, speak to you now, in this moment. Breathe. Receive God’s word of comfort this day.

Isaiah 40 is written to a community in exile at a time when the lives of many Jews had been turned upside down. It was disorienting time, a time of despair – a time of feeling God’s absence, God’s hiddenness, God’s remoteness. Fragmented and scattered, God’s people longed for return to home, a familiar way of life, the usual patterns of work and leisure and worship. A century before, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Many people were taken away to live in a foreign land, never to return. Others became refugees who streamed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Then the Southern Kingdom fell to the new superpower, the Babylonians. Again some people were forced to live in exile, while others were stuck in the ruins of post-apocalyptic Judah. Israel was gone. Judah was gone. The king was gone. The temple was gone. Everything they once knew was gone forever. Their patterns and ways of being in the world had been completely up-ended. They sat in Babylon, wondering if it would ever come back, if life would ever return to “normal.”

Our passage this morning from Isaiah can be described in one word: “Comfort.” This text offers a word of tenderness after a very long and dark night of judgment. It comes as the people continued to reflect upon how they had gotten where they were, and in the midst of recognition that they had at some point lost their way and wandered from God’s commands. Even before the exile, they had lost their sense of community, their faithful commitment to loving their neighbors, to ensuring justice, particularly for the most vulnerable. Scripture attributes the forced exile to an act of God, working through the Israelites adversaries.

As we examine our present situation, as I’ve said before, I’m not one to attribute the pandemic to a deliberate act of God, but the pandemic has revealed the deep cracks in our society: neglect for the least and the lost, economic exploitation and greed, deep-seated racism, a lack of confidence in authorities and elected officials, selfishness and a lack of willingness to make sacrifices, however small, for the good our neighbors and the broader community. We may point to COVID-19 as the reason for our present exile, but in truth we were already well on our way before anyone contracted the virus. Particularly in our country, we had already isolated and exiled ourselves to communities of shared ideologies and theologies, consciously shutting ourselves off from our neighbors because they didn’t look like us, act like us, believe like us, or vote like us. The pandemic just pointed a spotlight on the fractured nation we had already become.

Rather than seeing the present pandemic as an excuse for all that is out of joint in society and in our personal lives, can we see it as a God granted time of exile for our own good? A time-out. A chance to rethink and recalibrate our values and priorities. A chance to breakout of forgone conclusions, reframe our society, and refashion ourselves. I remember my senior year in High

School as I was anticipating heading off to another state to go to college. I had wonderful group of friends in High School but I become trapped roles that my friends, well-meaning as they were, had boxed me in. I was ready to grow into somebody new. Going away to college afforded me that opportunity, the chance to start afresh with new friends and establish myself differently. Sure, the old David didn't go away, but there was an opportunity to mature, to be free to explore and grow into somebody not limited by expectations of long-time friends. I think this time of COVID offers us a similar opportunity, to grow beyond who we were pre-pandemic, to be freed from being entrapped in the patterns of a pre-COVID time. And I think there is tremendous comfort in that knowledge.

In our passage this morning we heard:

A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The way is being prepared not for us to go to God but for God to come to us. Our job is to keep watch and to point to the signs of God's arrival. Like all of us, Isaiah preached to an audience that had experienced trauma and whose relationship to God had been deeply wounded as a result. For Isaiah's audience, God's hiddenness was far more real than God's presence. As people of faith Isaiah invites us to point to those places where God is present. To proclaim that white things are terrible now, take comfort: there is a tomorrow. God had not left us alone.

Where do you see God already present? I see God in healthcare workers and those who serve the most vulnerable – the exhausted but committed. I see God in neighbors and friends finding creative ways to stay connected. I see God in family traditions refashioned for remote connection. I see God in our church family – our formerly face to face folks as well as those who may have never worshiped in our Meeting House but have connected with us virtually. I see God in the many and varied ways we continue to be the church in our community and in the wider world. I see God in the mundane and the ordinary, simple expressions and exchanges. This past week I went to Subway to get some lunch. As I was standing in line, masked and physically distanced, a young couple was paying for their order. I heard the young man say, "I'll be back in just a sec. I need to get a dime from my truck." Reaching into my pocket for some change, I fished out a dime and said, "Here you go." His eyes lit up and he asked, "Are you sure?" "Of course," I replied. As he completed this transaction he got back some change. Turning to me he handed a nickel, "Here's young change," he said. We all shared a good laugh before he and his wife went on their way. I have no idea if they go to church, or where they live, or who they voted for. It didn't matter. For a moment, it was just a few strangers being neighbors to one another.

Around the world, people are seeking comfort, seeking something that will take away the pain. As followers of Jesus, we can't magically take away the pain of those hurting. But maybe we can be bearers of great comfort. In Advent, we again watch for the coming of this Child, who has revealed himself to us as the Christ, God Incarnate. How are we preparing for this arrival? Where are we looking for God to show up? How might we be surprised by the Christ Child who is coming to us? How can we – how can you – point to God already at work in our world?
AMEN.