

## “Prepare and Comfort”

The opening recitative of Handel's *Messiah* begins "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," and the tenor soloist proceeds to sing his way through the first 4 verses of this morning's scripture from Isaiah 40. A choral piece based on verse 5 follows: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" - a piece you will hear next Sunday when our choir sings. Another choral number presents the text of verse 9, and it is followed by the well-loved soprano aria, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd" – verse 11. One-fourth of the pieces in part one of *The Messiah* come directly from the eleven verses of Isaiah 40. Unarguably, this is a beautiful example of Old Testament poetry, words that have often been set to music and quoted extensively through the ages. As stunning as the poetry is, however, let's look a bit more closely at its historical context.

Isaiah 40 is the first chapter of what is referred to as Second Isaiah – chapters 40-55. The time period is 550-540 BCE, the Babylonian King is Cyrus, and the Hebrew people, exiled three times to Babylonia in 16 years, are longing for home and are weary for the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. We recall in Psalm 137 their poignant captivity lament: "By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willow trees we hung up our harps. For our captors asked us for songs, but how could we sing the Lord's song in this foreign land?"

In Second Isaiah the future for the exiled Hebrews is about the change. Isaiah 40 opens with some kind of heavenly council taking place. This is a common metaphorical literary device in the Old Testament, and we find other such divine assemblies recorded place in I Kings, Job, Psalms, and at other times in Isaiah. God gives a series of divine commands at this gathering: Comfort! Prepare! Cry out! Fear not!

Here is your God! There is the good news announcement that the Babylonian exile is coming to an end. The people have “paid their dues” and their punishment is finished. God says, “I will lead you from the wilderness to the straight, flat, and easily traveled highway back to Jerusalem – returning you home to Judah. My glory will be revealed, and all people shall see it. And this you can know as the truth, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”

Fast forward to the New Testament scripture of the morning, and we find parallels between Isaiah 40 and Mark 1. The Gospel writer also declares good news; not the good news of leaving Babylon and returning home, of course, but the good news of Jesus Christ, the reality of the coming of the Messiah that has been hinted at all through the book of Isaiah. John the Baptist, Jesus’ first cousin, arrives on the ministry scene before Jesus. Wearing his bazaar and distinctive camel hair clothes, eating his strange diet of locusts and wild honey, and loudly declaring that he is not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who comes, John heralds the “good news to the Gentiles and the Jews” - words we heard Beth sing. John the Baptizer quotes the same Isaiah 40 passage we’ve just been exploring, “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; and the voice of one crying out in the wilderness says, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight.’ The one who comes is more powerful than I.” The one who comes is the son of God!

To “prepare” seems an important directive in both the Isaiah and Mark passages. Prepare to be comforted; prepare to accept God’s forgiveness; prepare to see what the Lord will reveal; prepare to go home; prepare for the one coming to save the world; prepare for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The essence of Advent is preparation. Not the frenetic preparation to get our shopping, wrapping, cleaning, baking, decorating, card writing, traveling, and party-going selves ready for December 25<sup>th</sup>. The Advent season of preparation is to ready

ourselves for the coming of the Christ-child, to remind ourselves that Immanuel means God with us; God with the world. In spite of the oddity to prepare for what we know has already taken place, the season can be an occasion for meaningful reflection as it links the past to the future. The four weeks leading to Christmas are not dissimilar to the six weeks of Lent that lead to Easter. Both are times in the church year where we are encouraged and invited to slow down, to contemplate, to meditate, to confess, to pray, and to grow. Last year about this time, one of my friends was clearly frustrated with the sermon she had heard earlier in the week. Her pastor had preached on the topic of preparing oneself spiritually for the coming of the Christ-child and to contemplate what it means to call Jesus, the Messiah, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With a fair amount of disgust, she uttered, “Is he crazy? I don’t have any time to spend on spirituality this time of year!” Dare I say she might be missing the point of the season?

Alfred Burt, an accomplished jazz trumpeter in the 1940’s and 50’s, and a devout person of faith, composed a new Christmas song each year until his untimely death at age 34. These new carols were his gifts to friends and family, but were ultimately shared with the world. We still hear many of his songs this time of year: “Caroling, caroling through the snow, Christmas bells are ringing” and my favorite, “Some children see him,” which paints a picture of baby Jesus as seen through the eyes of children from **all** parts of the world. In another song he captures well the dichotomy of secular **and** sacred preparation this time of year:

We’ll dress this house with holly bright, add sprigs of mistletoe, trim the  
Christmas tree, set the lights aglow, wrap our gifts, set the table using our finest  
treasures, and prepare a kitchen full of wondrous fare.

The song is peppy and gives the impression of the same pace my friend has apparently set for herself during Advent. But the last verse of the song gets at the heart of what **sacred** preparation for this season might look like:

And you who would the Christ child greet, your heart also adorn;  
that it may be a dwelling place for Christ who now is born.

Let all unlovely things give place to souls bedecked with heavenly grace,  
that you may view His Holy face with joy on Christmas morn.

The overall theme for this morning's service is "the comforting face of God." In contrast to the "hidden face of God" that Pastor Janet spoke of last week, today we are reassured that God is very present, that God is an involved God, that God is a caring and comforting God. Preparing for Advent is being open to what God might be calling us to or directing us toward. Once we have prepared our minds and hearts to be present to God, it is possible that God will call us to repentance and confession. But for this morning, let us be open to the possibility that God is also calling us to the divine comfort that God provides. Hear again to the words of comfort in Isaiah 40:

"Comfort, O comfort my people."

"Speak *tenderly* to Jerusalem."

"Although the grass withers and the flower fades,  
the word of our God stands forever."

"God will feed the flock like a shepherd; will gather us close, and carry us  
near to God's heart."

Later we're going to sing the familiar Advent carol, "Comfort, comfort, O my people." We will sing these words: "Now **prepare** for God. God comforts those who sit in darkness, mourning beneath their sorrows' load. God has covered our sins, the peace of God awaits those who let their hearts be true and humble." God comforts those who **prepare** their hearts.

Where and how do we see the comforting face of God? How do we give meaning to such a phrase and not keep it at some esoteric, unattainable, "pie in the sky" notion? I would like to suggest that there are at least four ways that we can prepare ourselves to receive God's comfort: through the Word, through prayer and meditation, through music, and through each other.

The scriptures are, of course, overflowing with promises of comfort:

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

All people may take refuge in the shadow of God's wings.

God is my refuge in times of trouble.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened.

Through prayer and meditation our connection with God allows us to figuratively lay our burdens at the feet of Jesus. We can say and do whatever we wish in prayer; we can rail, scream, blame, question, cajole, or weep. In our prayers for comfort we partner with God, we acknowledge our neediness, and we release our efforts at control.

Through music we are comforted with tunes that calm our souls and lyrics that speak to our hearts.

Come, ye disconsolate, come to the mercy seat;

Here bring your wounded hearts; here tell your anguish.

Earth has no sorrows that Heaven cannot heal.

I came to Jesus as I was, so weary, worn and sad.

I found in him a resting place, and he has made me glad.

There is a place of comfort sweet, near to the heart of God.

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand,

I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.

Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Although I could continue quite awhile with more examples of how music can be a source of God's comfort, it is the fourth way - experiencing God's comfort through others - that I want to more fully emphasize.

I'm ready for 2008 to be done, finished, caput, over with. If I had to characterize the past year by giving it my personal title, it would be "The Year of Loss." It began with the loss of a colleague with whom to share the day to day joys and praises of pastoral ministry – of which there are many – but also the loss of someone to share the burdens and irritations – which, mercifully, are few. I am used to crises and difficult pastoral care situations after 15 years, but they had always been shared with a colleague. Even though we had wonderful temporary staff and church leadership during this time, there is no denying that much about pastoring is necessarily confidential. I found the first four months of the year, as your solo pastor, ones that were somewhat lonely and difficult.

In April I fell twice in three weeks – the second being a face smashing fall at the construction site of the new library, an accident that would prove to impact my health for the rest of the year.

In May, I directed what was probably my last church musical, and I was unprepared for how that would affect me. Having been part of such an awesome adventure since 1985, it felt something like an era coming to an end and a loss of creative outlet.

In June, three sets of close friends moved away, and then my mother died. Although she had Alzheimer's Disease for 16 years and no longer knew me, her death was still profound as I revisited what this disease had taken from her and from our family.

It was at this same time that I found out the library fall had resulted in a torn tendon in my right foot, and I quickly became immobile for the next few months. This immobility included the absence of driving and the presence of a boot, scooter, and crutches. My loss of mobility and dependence seemed to be the proverbial straw “that broke the camel’s back.” For the first time ever in my life, I found myself depressed. I was sad and distant from God.

As I’ve moved through yet another injury this fall, but **out** of that melancholy – Praise God! - I have learned **two** important lessons this year. The first one is that if a person is going through a difficult time, the comforting face of God is less likely to shine through others if they have no clue about your difficult circumstances. For most of this past year I was trying to walk through these tough times without letting anyone know about them. In the early part of the year, I wanted to be “super-solo” pastor. All along I wanted to be seen as independent, competent, and able to handle all that came my way **without** help. I wanted you to be proud of me. But, until I “woke up,” **my own pride** stood in the way of offering you many opportunities to be God’s comforting face to me.

A willingness to acknowledge weakness and appear vulnerable – something this society does not look very favorably upon – was a lonely lesson I had to learn. We are encouraged from childhood to be self-reliant. We want to hold onto our privacy. We think because others have their own difficult circumstances, we won’t burden them further with ours. But, I offer you the insight of one hard-earned lesson in 2008: when you are presented with difficult times – and who isn’t? – open up a little crack of vulnerability so that instead of looking into the dismal and lonely face of despair, you look into the face of God through the love and care of your brothers and sisters.

The second lesson I learned is that God’s comforting face often **does** shine through others **in spite** of our reticence to share about our circumstances. During this past

year there were countless occasions when you lifted me up in prayer, made me laugh, brought meals, coffee, muffins, and flowers, encouraged me to take time for myself, drove me to and from work, and wrote heartfelt notes and letters. The outpouring of care and love to me following my mother's death will be a life-long treasured memory. Pastor Janet has offered so many kindnesses, I've lost track of them all. I thank you for being the comforting face of God to me and to so many others in the congregation. There are many here who can attest to the power of God's comfort through the actions of this community. May we continue to prepare our hearts and minds to be open to those little Holy Spirit nudges that lead us to be a comforting face on behalf of God.

In this past year, I have learned in new ways to rest confidently in the promises of God. Today we have scriptural promises that are made to both the exiled Hebrews of yesteryear and to us in 2008 – and I quote: “Lift your voices with strength; lift your voices and do not fear! Here is your God! And that God will speak tenderly, will offer comfort, will gather us close and will carry us near to God's heart. And this is the truth, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”