

Pastor Jon's December 6, 2020, sermon

God comforts us in our wilderness times

“Comfort, O comfort my people says your God.”

This command to, “Comfort, O Comfort my people” is what God told the prophet Isaiah to preach to the Israelites who were now in Exile in Babylon. Imagine that, preaching hope in tough times.

These words may also sound familiar this time of year because you can hear them in the 2nd Movement of *Handel's Messiah*, “Comfort Ye My People.”

Imagine being in Exile. The world power of Babylon drove the Israelites in 587 BC from their homes, jobs, the food they loved, their temples, and took them a foreign land where their routines were upended, and their future was uncertain. Many wondered if God was even present with them anymore.

For us today, a form of exile could be dealing with Covid-19. It has taken us out of our routines and forced us into a time of uncertainty. Our exile may be quarantining in our own homes, not gathering with family and friends, or constantly calculating the risks of going out. It means grief to those who have lost loved ones. It means pain for our business owners and employers. It means the demand for medical care is outstripping the supply. Our health care workers are overstretched and weary.

With all of these things happening around us, it is easy to enter into thoughts of despair... and not see the hope our faith offers. It could mean that we turn to destructive behaviors to escape the anxiety instead of relying on our faith.

It is in this uncertainty and despair that God called the prophets in both our first lesson and Gospel to preach a word of hope to people in “wilderness places.” “A voice crying out in the Wilderness” in the original Hebrew language of the Old Testament literally means a herald who preaches hope in the “abandoned, empty, desolate” places in our world. Wilderness in the Bible was also a space where faith was cultivated and strengthened. In adversity our faith can grow.

Recall that in the wilderness that God gave water from a rock and manna from heaven to the Israelites, even though they constantly were complaining to Moses. Angels waited on Jesus when he was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. The wilderness is where Jesus chooses to begin his public ministry at the Jordan River in his baptism.

So on this 2nd Sunday in Advent, God offers us comfort to God's people.

In our first lesson, God commands the prophet Isaiah to, "Comfort, my People." In the original Hebrew "comfort" is a plural imperative verb. Isaiah was to comfort God's people saying:

1. The penalty of your sins, which caused your exile in the first place, have been paid in full... even double. The people turned away from God, rested on their laurels, and thought they could go it alone have served their term.
2. That a level highway is going to be built between Babylon and Israel to bring them home... this would have seemed impossible because the region between the two countries was very mountainous. Mountains made low and valleys lifted.
3. That God will come and deliver them... not with war and destruction... but like a shepherd who gathers up lambs in his arms.

In other words, the season of punishment for the Israelites has passed; the season of forgiveness and restoration has arrived. The Israelites eventually returned home after 70 years of exile, but their understanding of God's and God's presence changed. God was there all along, even in exile.

In our Gospel Mark picks up on this idea preaching hope through a voice crying out in the wilderness... John the Baptist. John's message was pointing to Jesus as the deliverer, Messiah, who would restore the people from Roman oppression and the exclusiveness of the Jewish faith. Jesus would come for all people, not just some people.

John preached that while we wait the Messiah, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, we are to repent, confess our sins, and live a new life.

This idea of preparing for the Messiah reminds me of a conversation I had this week with a friend. One of my really good pastor friends from Oregon, a golf buddy, Tim Herzfelt-Kamprath, had chest pains while golfing, went in for testing and learned he had two blocked arteries. He had open heart surgery this week and is doing well. Prior to surgery, he said he had the most beautiful conversations with his adult kids, their spouses/significants, and family. They knew the risks of surgery and just wanted to say whatever they needed to say before surgery. Those five days of conversations really lifted Tim and his wife Donna up. Preparing for a major surgery gives me a window in how to prepare for Christ's second coming and to welcome Christ at Christmas. To have a sense of urgency in saying what we need to say, to forgive those we need to forgive, and to repent and change what we need to change. You know what that looks like for you.

In our baptism we are promised forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and are called to practice daily repentance. Repentance literally means to turn around. To do an about face. To have a broken heart over what you have done and left undone and to make a change. When we repent, God forgives right then and there. This should be a daily practice for us.

Like Isaiah proclaims, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, has taken us into his arms and restored us to a right relationship with God. On the cross, Jesus showed his willingness to enter our wilderness places and rescue us from our sin and thoughts of despair. He stooped to our level and became of servant of all.

As a result we can live with hope in a future with God who enters our wildernesses and gives us a word to turn us.

Comfort O Comfort my People says your God. May you be comforted in knowing God is with us now and will journey with us through this pandemic or whatever comes our way.

And may you know that you, like John the Baptist, are called to point to Jesus in word and deed, and that it is our job to comfort others who are facing their own wilderness times.

Amen

