

The God Who Comforts

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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

I invite you to think of a time in your life when you were inconsolable: when a crushing loss, an unbearable burden of guilt, a broken heart, a throbbing pain, an injustice inflicted on you or on someone you love left you utterly vulnerable and absolutely defended in the same breath: your mind numbed, your spirit shattered, your soul isolated.

Israel was inconsolable. The crushing loss of temple, nation, and king, the guilt of their own idolatry and disobedience, their collective broken heart in the wake of God’s abandonment, a throbbing pain now become a dull ache after decades spent in exile, a collective sense that their punishment was less and less fitting the crime. God’s people were utterly vulnerable and absolutely defended in the same breath: minds numb, spirits shattered, souls isolated.

How had this happened to a people who were God’s people? Beginning with their disobedience and the destruction of the temple, then throughout the endless march to Babylon, and finally over these last fifty years in exile, God had been silent. In fact, the children and the grandchildren of the original exiles had only known themselves as abandoned by God. Enter Second Isaiah, the Prophet of Consolation. “Comfort, O comfort my people” Isaiah says to Israel at what Walter Brueggemann call Israel’s *nullpunkt*, the zero of Israel’s life. The surmise is that the prophet lived among them, was one of them, and this little guess leads me to say, in the first place, that when you are inconsolable, at the *nullpunkt*, comfort can only come from one who is present with you *just there*--in the darkness, the despair, the hopelessness. “What really counts in moments of pain and suffering,” priest and theologian Henri Nouwen writes, “is that someone stays with us. More important than any particular action or word of advice is the simple presence of someone who cares... who says... ‘I do not know what to say or what to do, but I want you to realize that I am with you, that I will not leave you alone.’”

Except notice that the words of comfort in Isaiah are not Isaiah’s. “Comfort, O comfort my people, *says your God*.” God commands Isaiah to comfort God’s people. The prophet is mediating *God’s* comfort as he speaks God’s word to them *just there*--in the darkness, the despair, the hopelessness. Likewise, the God who comforts sends us. Perhaps the most vivid experience of the God who comforts in this way was given me by a member of Nassau Church whose schizophrenia landed him in Trenton State Psychiatric Hospital. For months I visited him and listened in as he talked to the threatening voices in his head. But then one day, without looking at me, he quit his voices and spoke directly to me. He said that he had prayed and prayed to God, asking God to help him out of the darkness of his mental illness and God was silent. Then he stopped, looked at me and said matter-of-factly, “But you are here, I suppose, because God has sent you.”

I take that to mean that the comfort we give to each other, in the second place, is not only ours but God’s. When I darken the door of your hospital room or visit you in the valley of the shadow of death, I come as one who has been sent to you by the God who comforts. So too, the God of comfort sends you to the inconsolable, even if you do not know the words to say. Friends and strangers, deacons and ministers mediate God’s comfort simply by showing up and continuing to show up *just there*--in the darkness, the despair, the hopelessness.

Then, in the third place, the God who comforts has mercy on us. The prophet begins to speak tenderly to his fellow exiles, to speak to their hearts. He cries to them that they have suffered enough, that their unbearable burden of guilt has been taken from them, and that the punishment inflicted on them by God is over. Mind you, they had been in exile for fifty years. On one hand, they got up every morning and did what they had to do to live. They even prospered in Babylon and could have gone to their graves as productive members of Babylonian society. But on the other hand, they had yet to reckon with what was lost. The mercy of the God who comforts begins to wring out of our inconsolable selves the hard work of lament and complaint.

In Brueggemann’s words, the first work of exiles is the work of relinquishing what is gone, of resisting every denial, every act of nostalgia, of acknowledging and embracing what has ended. “I know the thing I want is the thing I can never get,” C.S. Lewis laments late in *A Grief Observed*. “The old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the lovemaking, the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace.” Yet in the midst of his lament, Lewis likens the God who comforts to a surgeon, whose intentions are wholly good. “The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation were complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless.” Lament demands a season of its own. This season. “Israel will not soon have done

with its sense of loss, variously expressed as grief and rage,” Brueggemann admits. Nevertheless, lament and complaint, grief and rage flung in the direction of the God who comforts is the soul’s work in exile.

Only then, and in the fourth place, can the God of comfort create in us a future. With room forged in the people’s heart where grief and anger had been before, the exiles are prepared “to receive what is inexplicably and inscrutably given by [God], to resist every measure of despair, to await and affirm what [God], beyond every *quid pro quo*, now gives. The faith of Israel envisions no automatic move from relinquishment to reception,” Brueggemann hurries to admit. “One does not follow necessarily from or after the other. [Still,] Israel’s poets, singers and speakers of oracles, heard as the very assurance of [God’s] own voice, arise precisely in the *nullpunkt*” now to proclaim the good news of a humanly inconceivable future. “Get thee up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up. . . .” The horizon, the future that was long obscured by tears—the hot tears of anger or the blinding tears of grief—now comes into view.

Tangibly, if you will permit an English major this tangent, the future tense begins to reappear in the speech of the prophet. “There is an actual sense in which every human use of the future tense of the verb ‘to be,’” George Steiner writes, “is a negation, however limited, [of the power of death]. Even as every use of an ‘if’ sentence tells of a refusal of the brute inevitability, of the despotism of the fact. ‘Shall’, ‘will’ and ‘if’ . . . are the passwords to hope. . . . Take away energizing anticipation, the imperative of waiting [that Advent is], and these tenses will be end-stopped.” “Every valley *shall be* lifted up and every hill [*shall*] be made low; the uneven ground *shall* become level, and the rough places plain. Then the glory of the Lord *shall be revealed*, and all people *shall see* it together, for the mouth of the Lord (the mouth of the God of comfort), has spoken it.” “Future tenses,” Steiner says, “are an idiom of the messianic,”

So it is that these inconsolable exiles begin to hope again. Isaiah’s subjunctive mood points God’s people toward the coming of the God whom they hope will rule with might, will feed them as a shepherd and gather them as lambs in his arms, will carry them in his bosom and will gently lead the mother sheep. . . . home. Future tenses are an idiom of the messianic.

Still, they are a long way from home. Nine hundred miles, to be exact, of wilderness and wasteland between them and Jerusalem, that some will not survive. Five hundred years, to be honest, until the last of the prophets appears, the messenger in Mark anticipated by Isaiah, announcing the Messiah’s arrival. John tells the crowd in the wilderness, borrowing Isaiah’s words, to relinquish what is already gone, to embrace what has long ago ended, and to prepare the way for the God whose glory *will be revealed*, the God all flesh *shall see* it together in a rabbi from Nazareth of Galilee. Future tenses are an idiom of the messianic.

On this second Sunday of Advent, Isaiah has been sent to inconsolable exiles living a long way from home. He has been sent to you and to me just here, in the darkness. He speaks a word of comfort we cannot say to ourselves, a word that is not his but God’s. He mercifully tells us that our warfare with each other and with God is ended, all evidence to the contrary. And he is presently inviting us to lament. Relinquish what is gone. Resist every denial, every act of nostalgia. Embrace what has ended. But we live in a time and among a people determined to hold on to what used to be, to indulge in nostalgia, to quit the future tense for the past tense when this nation was great. We are utterly vulnerable and completely defended. I think this is because living unconsciously at the *nullpunkt* evokes deep and raw fear in the face of a future that is not in our hands but God’s. “Do not fear,” Isaiah says at the last to the cities and to this city. “Here is your God”:

In your pain and uncertainty
she will come to you.
In your struggle, your healing,
she will carry you.
In your recovery, your unfolding,
she will feed you.
In your brokenness and your guilt,
she will hold you. . . .
Lift up your hearts,
See, your God is coming.
(Steve Garnaas-Holmes)

In the wilderness of your heart, the God who comforts is preparing a way. Thanks be to God! Amen.