

*Good Tidings of Comfort and ...Repentance*

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1: 1-8

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For much of my life, the Comfort Ye from Handel's Messiah was a staple of the second Sunday of Advent. Year after year it marked my way. I can hear the strings and the harpsichord, the soaring tenor voice, the dance between the two.

This week as I've sat with the scripture from which the Comfort Ye comes, the scripture that is our text for today, I've been listening to it at home, and in the van, and singing it in the shower. One of my children asked me if I was just listening to it on "repeat." And, I confess that the answer was "yes, yes I am."

It buoys me up. It makes my heart soar.

There are so many good one-liners in Isaiah 40 - so much potential for inspirational posters, or mugs, or t-shirts.

A few weeks ago as we prayed for our nation we sat with part of Isaiah 40. *Do you not know, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth - He will not grow tired or weary. And his understanding, no one can fathom!* That's really uplifting!

There's the bit that promises: *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak! Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength! They will soar on wings like eagles! They will run and not grow weary! They will walk and not grow faint!*

And then in today's text we find not only a cry of *comfort*, but that poetic image of lifting the valleys and making straight the path. And there is the bit about the word of the Lord standing forever.

In fact - my mother-in-law has a hand towel with that promise on it. *The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Isaiah 40 is full of generally uplifting promises, line after line. Which is why, as I was reading in preparation for today, I was intrigued to come across a warning from Walter Brueggemann against getting caught up in "generic evangelical buoyancy" of this passage without going deeper.

There is *that bit about* Jerusalem having paid her penalty.

It's this line about telling Jerusalem that her penalty has been paid that always sticks in my chest a bit. "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." This is so harsh.

I think we could all use a bit of buoyancy, no matter how generic it might be, these days. But let's see if we can't understand a little bit more about this passage, and that warning, and what we might carry with us instead.

Isaiah is a really long book and it is generally understood to have two different and distinct parts. The first part ends with the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon - and God's withdrawal of favor from the people Israel. There was war and violence and death and devastation.

Isaiah 40 is the first chapter of the second section. It announces that the atrocities are over. I suspect many of us perceive all sorts of destruction and violence and warfare around us and yearn for these promises that the atrocities are over.

Significantly, most scholars believe this second portion of Isaiah was written much much later, and the promises of Isaiah 40 are set about 160 years after Isaiah 39. Brueggemann calls this “the long pause” - the very long pause between the fall of Jerusalem and these words of comfort. In American history, looking back 160 years puts us in 1860, the year Lincoln was elected. Using that length of time as a reference for how long God was absent, in Isaiah’s telling, is stunning. It reminds me how limited my own sense of time is.

And what was this about? What is this iniquity and pardon about? Isaiah understands the devastation of Jerusalem Babylon to be a direct result of the failed public faith of the people Israel - of their allegiance to things other than God. And we can wonder how we might read this story in our context. God is still God, and the church is often understood to be the inheritor of the line of Judah, so what might Babylon be for us?

These days - and throughout history, really, “Babylon” is used to describe all kinds of chaos and adherence to ideologies that are not of God. Even within the scriptures, “Babylon” is already being used to describe something else entirely - the Book of Revelation refers to Imperial Rome as “Babylon.”

How else have you heard it used?

To what ideologies that are not of God do folks adhere?

What things might we trust to order our lives when trusting God seems to ... difficult?

Or too easy? Or nonsensical?

How do those things seep into our public lives? Our private lives? Our life as a community?

And I have to admit - I struggle with this idea found not only in Isaiah, but in most of the prophets, that YHWH might will destruction. That’s certainly a complicated theological question for the ages. We know how important it is to read the entire story of God - in our lives and in all that has come before. This is why we must be careful not to ever just pick one idea, or verse out. This is the essence of Brueggeman’s warning against seeing only the buoyant part of this passage - skipping over the iniquity and suffering and pardon.

Allowing those to be a part of our reading, let us name and carry with us some bits of good news.

1. When we consider Babylon, and what ideologies might hold sway over us, we also get to ask whether there is life outside of these ideologies, and whether that is good news. And I think the answer is usually yes, there there is life outside of ideologies, and that yes, this is good news, because, stripped of ideology, we can more easily draw near to God.
2. God’s proclamation is one of comfort: Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God. No matter how long the pause may feel - or be - between devastation and comfort, God speaks comfort in the wilderness. This is good news.
3. This passage is quoted in Mark. That is good news. Because it points us to a new telling. To a new covenant. To a new understanding. And it points us to our Baptism. Mark 1 starts off:

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

And then, after it quotes Isaiah, and the language about preparing a way in the wilderness, the gospel says this:

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Look - the entire story of God prods us to remember that we are called to repent. We are called to turn away from those things that tangle us up and keep us from being faithful to God. When we acknowledge those things that bind us, when we decide to shed those things that tether us to this world, when we confess to God our brokenness - we are forgiven. And facing this part about iniquity and pardon is a part of approaching the inbreaking of Jesus into our lives, again, at the manger. It undergirds our buoyancy.

So, my friends, when you hear Isaiah 40 - perhaps in the soaring voicing of Handel's Messiah, perhaps in the voice of a child reading the scriptures, perhaps in the boisterous hymn we sang today, be buoyed up by this promise that our inequities are pardoned. That's not general evangelical buoyancy. That, family of God, is the good news of the Jesus on whom we wait. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," says your God.