

Gospel - Mark 1: 1-8

Advent 2

Sermon 12.6.20

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Comfort, , O comfort my people, says the Lord.

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible, and certainly the hymn is my favorite Advent musical rendering.

The message of comfort seems particularly important this year, as we face more months of isolation and uncertainty. So first, a bit of context for this verse from Isaiah:

Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and enslaved the Jewish people. They were exiled for nearly 50 years.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are filled with death and destruction. God's people worshipped false gods, they succumbed to earthly riches, they aligned with other nations rather than putting their trust in the Lord. And, as the book of Isaiah explains in colorful language, they are punished. There are occasional glimmers of hope in this 39-chapter sea of destruction, but, as was likely the universal feeling of those exiled, not much looked rosy.

The 40th chapter turns the corner in the book, to the extent that some biblical scholars say this is a different writer. From here to the end of the book are stories of what will be – what horrid things will rain down on Israel's enemies, what joy will come to those who believe and are reconciled with God.

I daresay, as tough as this year has been, it doesn't compare with 47 years of destruction, slavery and exile. And I hope that in this year of quiet, you have had time to count your many blessings, to talk with God and renew your commitment to him.

A bit farther in today's passage from Isaiah:

A voice cries out:

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

And, as you likely noted, this is repeated in the Gospel, from the first chapter of the book of Mark, the introduction to the Good News of Christ our Savior:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.'"

A voice cries out:

Father Steve shared with me a fantastic Advent podcast series called “Prophetic Voices,” provided by the Episcopal Church. I added the link to my written version of this sermon, and I encourage you to listen in:

<https://cms.megaphone.fm/channel/prophetic-voices>

Guests for the 2nd Sunday in Advent included Phil Hooper, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Leilanda Leigh, Longmont, Colorado; and Marlene Forrest; Richmond, Virginia.

These three shared quite a discussion about who is calling out in our world today. A voice cries out!

Perhaps polite society prefers we do not cry out, but injustice still exists, pain still haunts us, loneliness still brings us low. Who is calling out in our community?

We’ve had a recent teen suicide in Mason County. Did that young person call out? How? To whom?

Sources all over the internet warn of the increased danger of suicide during the pandemic, particularly among teens.

From my vantage point at the ripe old age of – AHEM, missing a Forest Festival or a graduation or an OysterFest or a friend’s birthday party seems a small price to pay to ensure the health care system in Mason County isn’t burdened with my family’s illness. But at 14 or 16 or 18? What must that feel like?

Add to that: Too much screen time, too little interaction with friends, too much opportunity to contemplate one’s situation without the benefit of perspective from others. And then, in too many cases, neglect or abuse inside the home. Hunger, cold, squalor, sleep deprivation.

Who is crying out in our nation?

Black people, throughout the nation, have been crying out for centuries. This cry has intensified yet again since the murder of George Floyd last summer. Corporations and governments promise reforms, but how long is enough?

Who is crying out in our world?

Struggles for political recognition among indigenous people in Bolivia. Concentration camps for reeducation of Muslims in China. Ethnic profiling in Ethiopia. It’s no wonder many of us tune out the news. But while we’re turning a blind eye, young people call our attention to human rights struggles throughout the world.

Who’s crying out?

My son Taylor is. I’m not sure we share a single political view, but I am so proud of him. He recognizes that he is a white, male, American of privilege, he is educated, he has a great job, and he has a marvelous safety net in his family. He cries out on behalf of so much of the inequality across the nation and across the world. I am blessed that he forces me to listen.

From the cultural desolation of Isaiah to the backrooms of Mason County to the streets of our nation to the concentration camps of China, people of color are crying out. Poor people are crying out. Young people are crying out.

In addition to posing the question of who is crying out, the podcast participants asked, “Who do we need to listen to?” In the words of Phil Hooper: “Am I the one who these words of comfort are for, or am I the one being called to comfort?” And Leilanda Lee further asked: How can we listen with all our faculties?” Marlene Forrest pointed out: Prophetic voices aren’t just about what’s in the future – it’s truth-telling now.”

One thought hit me pretty hard among the pearls of wisdom from the podcast. Again, this was Marlene Forrest, who is priest-in-charge at St. Philips Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, which she describes as an all-black congregation. “Do our voices affirm or do they create boundaries?” she asked. In other words, how are we as elders responding to these young voices? Are we encouraging their evangelism, their caring, their action? Or are we crushing them with our well-meaning advice from our lofty perspective of – name the number – years on this earth? Who’s truth-telling, and who’s quashing the truth?

John the Baptist was just an ordinary guy. In fact, from all descriptions, he and his camel's hair shirt and his diet of locusts might well be someone we'd avoid if we saw him on the street today. Yet he, too, was prophetic. And I'll repeat another question posed in the podcast: "What if the wilderness is the status quo?"

John baptized people in water, and as Marlene Forrest pointed out, baptism isn't a one-time thing. "The Holy Spirit washes us clean every single day," she reminded us. And that washing is both an emptying of old, outdated, wrong-headed ideas and a re-filling with new ones.

We are filled with the Holy Spirit. That's the truth-telling we can share with those crying out. That gives us the power to listen with hands and feet and hearts, in addition to ears. One injustice at a time. It's a process, to be certain. Our Epistle today contains the statement: that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

That is such a tough concept for young people. And yes, it's often tough for me. Yet Peter's admonition is about God, not about us. How patient has God been with us, his people, who have exploited his Earth, killed countless of the humans He created, perpetrated untold suffering over a period of centuries? Isn't it time, beyond time, to right the wrongs?

And if one day is like a thousand years, what do we do in the meantime? We listen. To those who cry out with their truth-telling. We comfort those voices in our wilderness. With our knowledge that Christ our Savior will come again. And we prepare the way, making the path straight. One injustice at a time.

Amen.