

Advent 2 (B)
December 6, 2020
Texts: Isaiah 40:1-10
Mark 25:31-46

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I was struck this week by a strange sense of convergence as I was studying our passage from Isaiah—“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” These words were first addressed to the Judean exiles living in Babylon under the thumb of the empire that had destroyed their nation and forcibly removed them from their homes. They were in a place where they felt they didn’t belong. They grieved the loss of their homeland. They felt displaced. A normal life had been ripped away from them, and they felt lost.

In this strange, strange year, I wonder how many of those feelings are reflected in your experience. We’ve endured nine months of quarantines and lockdowns. We’ve been wearing masks everywhere we go, but mostly we’ve been staying home as much as possible. We didn’t travel for Thanksgiving, and most of us probably won’t travel for Christmas either. There’s so much worry and anxiety, and rates of illness and hospitalizations and deaths have climbed significantly over the past several weeks, across the state and across the country. It doesn’t feel like the place I’ve always known as home.

And that’s only one of the crises we’re facing. There were the forest fires this summer. There were months of protests against racism and police violence. A lot of people have begun to feel that they just don’t recognize their own country any more—some because of so much damage and destruction, and others because they’ve begun to see some of the ways our nation has never really lived up to its ideals of freedom and equality for all, particularly where people of color are concerned. And, of course, there’s the election, and the ongoing campaign of lies about ballot fraud. This doesn’t feel like our home, does it? It’s enough to make us feel sad and confused, upset and lost, even displaced. I wonder if you’re feeling that “None of this is right, and I’m not OK with it.”

If so, then you have a lot in common with our forebears in faith who lived in exile in Babylon—both in the feelings of dislocation and in the need for comfort, for hope. And I believe those words of comfort and hope that were originally spoken to those captives in Babylon can also speak to us, even though they were very specific to the situation of God’s people in exile. The people heard that the time of exile was over, and God would soon bring the people to their homeland. They heard that God had listened to their cries and would break the power of Babylon. They heard that God would gently lead the people home, like a shepherd leading and caring for his sheep. And that’s exactly what happened.

And even though we don’t live in Babylon, even though we aren’t anticipating a return to Jerusalem, these words can also speak to us about what God is up to in our world and in our lives. For us as Christians, we read the promises of scripture through Jesus, understanding that Jesus is the focal point for God’s great work of love to heal and renew the human family. Jesus embodies life with God and reveals to us our own true humanity, what a genuinely human life looks like, what the true potential of being human is. It looks like love, like compassion toward

those who suffer and generosity toward neighbors in need. True humanity looks like forgiveness to overcome estrangement and to restore broken relationships. It looks like an inclusive welcome for all people, and humility that doesn't let ego lead the way, but instead is all about self-giving love.

The way of comfort, the way of life and hope and blessing, for Judah in exile was the way through the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. The way of comfort, of life and hope and blessing for us, is through a change of mind and heart, to follow Jesus in his way of compassion and forgiveness and generosity and humility and inclusive community. It's so very appropriate, then, that we hear from John the Baptist, calling us to repent, because God's saving work is coming to us. Repentance isn't beating ourselves up or feeling guilty and ashamed. In the Bible, repentance is a change of heart and change of mind, to see that the path we're on is a dead end, and to turn around. So if you've recognized that the cultural values we've all been marinating in—values like greed and immediate gratification and self-promotion and always putting yourself first, valuing rage and punishment and destroying enemies—if you've recognized that that kind of life isn't going to lead anywhere you really want to go, you're half the way there already! Jesus invites us all to move ever more deeply into his way of compassion and forgiveness, of hospitality and welcome, and generosity and humility. Jesus's way is the way of comfort and healing for the whole human family.

You might be wondering, though, what good is it really going to accomplish if I, as a single individual, change my heart, change how I live. In the big picture of things, is anything really going to change? I mean, really? In our nation, there is so much division and so much hate, there is so much hopelessness and fear and resentment. There is so much lying! As a nation, we are so stingy and punitive. What will be different if I listen to John the Baptist, if I attend to Jesus' way of compassion?

The prophet of the exile was there too. When God said, "Take a message of comfort to my people," the prophet said, "What word will make any kind of difference? The people are grass—they are as insubstantial and unreliable as a wildflower. They wither and fade in a summer breeze, let alone when the storms of life really blow." And here's a kick in the pants—God agreed! Yes, the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. None of this is about our big change of heart and change of mind, so we can change the world. It's about getting on board with what God is already doing. God is already working to heal and renew the human family. God is already at work to overcome divisions and give new life. God is already at work to make whole what is broken. Do you want to be part of that, or not? God is already at work to make of the human family a true home where there's a place for everyone, where God can live among us. Do you want to be part of that home, or not?

Dear, dear people of God. In this sucky, awful year, when everything around us feels chaotic and bizarre, when our country doesn't feel like home anymore, when our heart aches for neighbors who are going through terribly difficult times, when we might be struggling too, with loneliness or worry or anxiety—the word of our God will stand forever. God is reliable. God's

mercy and compassion for us are reliable. God's healing power is reliable. God's forgiveness is reliable. God's comfort and strength is reliable. So while the world goes crazy around us, and while we give our hands to some work of love, of compassion, of forgiveness or generosity or welcome, this is where our hearts can rest: God is already at work, and God's work is for healing and renewal. God's work for is for peace and wholeness and community. The word of our God will stand forever, and this is where we will find strength, and comfort, and hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.