

Isaiah 40:1-11
Comfort, Comfort, O My People
WRCoB 12.9.18

We assume we know the meaning of the word prophet.

Mostly, we think of a prophet as glorified fortune-teller.

Someone who can look into the future
And tell us what's going to happen.

But that's not really the Biblical definition of prophet.

A prophet, in the Biblical sense
Is simply a spokesperson for God.

Someone who has the audacity to claim
That they speak on behalf of God,
The Lord and Creator of our Universe.

Most of them are in-your-face, edgy, snarky, cynical
Irritable and irritating people.

Frederick Buechner states there is no Biblical evidence
That anyone ever asked a prophet over for supper
More than once.

You see, a prophet doesn't have to look into the future . . .
Their voice is prophetic because in the present
They see the writing on the wall.

The present circumstances are all they need to determine
That the world is going to hell in a handbasket.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure this out
But it does take a few God-given qualifications.

Prophets consider themselves set-apart.
They feel specifically called by God
And they've a hard time keeping their mouth shut.

They try hard to be thick-skinned
But since nobody likes them
And tell them as much
They become bitter and lonely.

They notice the direction the wind is blowing
They perceive the coming destruction
And just can't help themselves.

From Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Micah
Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zechariah
And perhaps the most famous, John the Baptist.

They are compelled to tell it like it is.

And as a result, they are chastised, beaten, and imprisoned
And in the case of John the Baptist, beheaded.

The burning within them to warn the world
Overcomes any sense of self-preservation.

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You won't find too many Christmas Card greetings
With something John the Baptist said.

I mean, how would it be to open a Christmas Greeting
From your pastor that said:

**“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from
the coming wrath? (Luke 3:7 NIV), ‘Merry Christmas.’”**

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The other special qualification prophets have, oddly enough
Is that they truly love God
And truly want the best for people.

One of the exceptions in all this is the prophet Isaiah.

Don't get me wrong

Isaiah spewed plenty of snarky comments.

But his word are found on Hallmark Cards.

Perhaps the most famous being 9:6

A child would be born who would be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

~~

Isaiah wrote during the Exile . . .

A time when the Babylonians invaded Judah

And sent the people packing off to Babylon.

Filled with grief and sorrow . . .

Homeless and forsaken . . .

The people grieved:

**Psalm 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat
down and there we wept when we remembered
Zion.**

One of those prophets who saw it coming was Isaiah!

He knew they didn't give a hoot for the marginalized.

Knew they were downright hostile to immigrants.

Knew they worshiped other gods.

Isaiah tried to warn them to change their ways

While they still had a fighting chance.

But it was too late!

They now found themselves exiled in a foreign land

Mourning their loss.

But in chapter 40, a change in tone takes place
Isaiah speaks words of comfort.

That even in the midst of their despair
And even though it was still a long way coming
God was preparing to do something new.

They had suffered enough
They had paid for their iniquities
They had served their time.

Isaiah tells the people to take comfort, God has the final say.

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This word, comfort, is an interesting word.

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT
The word for comfort is *paraclete*.

It is the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit.

Consider this . . . in John 14
Jesus tells his disciples he will leave them
But that he would send for another.

John 14:16 (KJV)

16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever

This word “comforter” is the Greek word *paraclete*.

You will also see it translated as Advocate, Helper, or Friend.

But what is truly enlightening
Is that when you break the word down even further
Paraclete, literally means “one who walks alongside.”

Jesus describes the coming of the Holy Spirit
As God in Spirit who will walk along beside you.

And so, when we hear Isaiah use the word comfort
We can define it to mean

That one day God will come and walk alongside.

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And isn't that the whole point of the Incarnation?

That in Christmas
We anticipate God coming to us in flesh and blood?

Immanuel, means specifically that . . . "God with us."

God in Jesus comes to us as *paraclete*
The one who walks alongside.

And by doing so . . .
As he said he would do 2500 years ago
Through the prophet Isaiah

God promises comfort in the midst of trouble;
Peace on earth good will toward all.

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I don't know about you
But when I find myself in difficult moments

I yearn for someone to share my misery with
Someone who will walk beside me through it.

Their presence is comforting.

And I don't know about you
But it is not so much in the words spoken
That I find comfort
But in their unspoken presence.

I know I've found myself in situations
When I just can't find the right words.

Everything sounds so cliché?

But I am learning . . . and I say learning
Because I'm one that likes to talk

That if I can just find the right words . . .
It might offer some comfort.

Particularly in moments of real tragedy
Sometimes it's better not to say anything.

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Ray and Judy Williamson's son, David,
Was killed in a fall during a hike.

They were overwhelmed by the outpouring of love.

What they remember most about the visitation and funeral
Was not the words spoken to them.

Ray says,

"I used to wonder if I should go to the funeral home, when somebody had a tragedy because I always feel so awkward and don't know what to say.

But I'll never ask again. I'll always go. It's not what you say but your presence that makes the difference."

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The Apostle Paul speaks about this:

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NLT)

3 All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of

all comfort. 4 He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

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God is the source of our comfort.

And as we find God's comfort
In the Christ who walks alongside of us

So too, can we be a comfort to others through Christ
By walking alongside of them through difficult times.

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Leonard Sweet shares the following story:

“Today I visited an eight-year-old girl dying of cancer
Her body disfigured by her disease and its treatment.

She was in almost constant pain.

As I entered her room,
I was overcome immediately by her suffering—
So unjust, unfair, unreasonable.

Even more overpowering
Was the presence of her grandmother

Lying in bed beside her with her huge body
Embracing this precious, inhuman suffering.

I stood in awe, for I knew I was on holy ground.

The suffering of innocent children
Is horrifying beyond words.

I will never forget the great,
Gentle arms and body of this grandmother.

She never spoke while I was there.

She was holding and participating in suffering
That she could not relieve,
And somehow her silent presence was relieving it.

No words could express the magnitude of her love.

(Leonard Sweet, Postmodern Pilgrims (Broadman & Holman, 2000), p.16)

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Brothers and Sisters

Such is the love of God in Christ Jesus . . .

Who holds us and participates in our suffering . . .

Who willingly enters our human condition . . .

Who silently walks beside us . . .

Take comfort . . . It is Christ our Savior who comes.

He speaks tenderly

He tells you your hard service is over
Your iniquities pardoned.

Jesus, the Incarnate . . .

Born to save

Born to suffer

Born to be our Immanuel, God with us.

Revelation 22:20 NRSV The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!