

Isaiah 40:1-11  
Taking Comfort in Turbulent Times  
WRCoB 12.6.20

For 39 chapters, Isaiah rants and rages  
For the sins of God's people.

He calls people to repent, to turn their lives around  
And warns them of God's scathing judgment to come.

And then, we come to chapter 40.

The tone of his voice completely changes.

It is so different many scholars believe  
It's a different writer.

The first words from his mouth  
**Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God**

**Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her  
That she has served her time  
That her penalty is paid**

**That she has received from the Lord's hand  
Double for all her sins**

On this the second Sunday of Advent for the year 2020  
It seems a rather apt pronouncement.

It does feel like we are paying double for our sins.

If we thought, it was already bad enough  
Experts warn it'll get worse.

Even with a vaccine on the horizon  
It'll be awhile before things get better.

Meanwhile, we are anticipating stricter restrictions  
Upon our freedom of movement and association.

We all are experiencing fatigue, isolation, and loneliness.

Everyone one of us, no doubt  
Knows someone affected by corona  
And many actively grieve loss of life.

Compound this with a hurricane season  
That was the most active Atlantic season  
And the seventh costliest one on record.

Compound this with the fires that cost lives and properties  
Out on the west coast

For some it might feel they are paying triple for their sins.

Compound this with how the pandemic revealed  
Terrible inequities and injustices within our society.

With all this, we're looking ahead to a dark and grisly winter.

~~

Though circumstance are a bit different  
Troubling times gripped Israel during Isaiah's time.

The people of Israel heard Isaiah's words  
While displaced and in exile  
Far from the comforts of home.

They too grieved terrible losses.

They felt abandoned by God  
And perceived their due  
Was God's punishment for their sins.

If there ever was a time for words of comfort  
It was then! And it is now!

But you say, how can one preach comfort and hope  
In the midst of such tragedy?  
But how can one not?

God calls the preacher to preach good news.

All is not lost, even if it feels that way.

This good news points to a God actively engaged  
Even in the midst of our troubling circumstances.

**Isaiah 40:9 NRSV**

**<sup>9</sup>Get you 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, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"**

This is Advent.

That God is here.

That God has not forsaken

That something big is on the horizon

And in due course, all will be well.

And this is good news,

A Savior is coming who will save us from our sins!

And Jesus is his name.

Advent is the season of anticipation.

We wait expectantly and hopefully

For what God is about to do.

~~

The Chinese philosopher, Confucius, 500 before Christ

Said something that seems to fit the scene.

*A seed grows with no sound, but a tree falls with a huge noise. Destruction has noise, but creation is quiet. This is the power of silence. Grow Silently.*

A tree falls with a tremendous crash.

Destruction is deafening.

But the sound of creating is silent.

A seed grows without sound.

~~

Destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the nation of Israel  
Came with the noise of war.

The clatter of sword and shields  
The whinnying of horses  
The screams of pain and terror.

The cities and countryside ransack and raped.

The beloved Jerusalem, the City of God, mind you  
Its magnificent and majestic temple  
Razed to the ground.

The remaining people wept and mourned  
As they were led into captivity in Babylonia.

It was a thunderous end to the nation.

However, all during the people's exile  
As they grieved their plight  
God was silently at work.

The people of Israel's greatest faith-building activities  
Took place during their isolation  
As a displaced people.

Much of what we know as the Old Testament  
Scribes wrote down while in exile.

Despite their hardship their faith matured  
During the darkest period of their history.

~~

So too, this past year, the world has experienced  
The noise of destruction.

From the pandemic, to the natural calamities,  
From the violence of war and crime  
To the glaring injustices and inequities . . .  
Destruction is a noisy business.

But within the uproar of 2020  
God is quietly planting seeds of hope and peace.

In the midst of the winter of our discontent  
A new day is dawning.

A tree falls with great noise  
But within the root of Jesse  
A new branch grows silently.

~~

A voice in the wind says, "Cry out!"

And the preacher asks, "What shall I cry?"

And the voice answers  
"All people are like grass."

"New and fresh in the morning  
They wither when the evening comes."

If nothing else, this year has shown us  
How sacred and fragile life and creation really are.

How the best-laid plans of mice and men go astray.

That the only real given in life is death.

### **Psalm 90:9-10, 12**

**The days of our lives are seventy years, or perhaps  
eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil  
and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.**

**So, teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise  
heart.**

~~

And so, I ask

As the tree of 2020 falls with a thunderous crash  
What of God grows silently among us?

Where are we seeing new growth?

What is God doing within the circles of our societies  
To build his kingdom here as it is in heaven?

What is God doing in the life of our congregations  
Churches, synagogues and mosques?

What is God doing in our neighborhoods?

God's work is quiet and subtle  
But it is there amongst the ruins of our year.

Over the course of our next Advent Sundays  
I'd like to try and see if we can't identify  
Some of the places God is at work.

~~

Advent is the season of anticipation.

We anticipate the arrival of God's Messiah, the Christ child.

We celebrate his coming birth and his second coming.

This particular Christmas may not be the same  
As the Christmases before.

Concerns of Covid has changed the way  
We do Advent and Christmas.

No yuletide gatherings with fruitcake and hot chocolate.

No Christmas Caroling for shut-ins and nursing homes.

No in person Christmas Eve service.

Christmas this year will be a bit apocalyptic.

Chris Pappalardo of Summit Church  
In Raleigh, NC, writes

*Advent is meant to be a time of hope, peace, joy and love. These are beautiful virtues, but this year they risk sounding hollow. This time last year, while many Americans were worried about pumpkin pie and Black Friday deals, a deadly virus was silently starting to spread.*



*Most of us knew nothing about it then, but with hundreds of thousands dead in our country alone, we certainly know about it now. Can we speak of hope in such a time?*

We can speak of hope and peace at such a time  
Specifically because Advent anticipates  
The first and second coming of Christ.

The first when he came into our world in the form of a baby

And the second when he comes to claim his rightly kingdom.

~~

Kathryn Shifferdecker from the website, Working Preacher  
Writes in her commentary on this week's text

*The complete fulfillment of God's purposes has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and such is Advent hope.*

~~

So this Advent Season, may God grant you  
The courage and boldness to proclaim it.

Yes, we have heard the thunderous crash  
Of a great tree falling.

But may we listen for God  
Who is busy planting and growing new things  
Within our midst.

They grow silently.

Take comfort, O my people, says your God, take comfort.