

Sermon for Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011
"Words of Comfort"
Text: Isaiah 40
Rev. Rex Piercy

I love this passage from Isaiah chapter 40. I can hear it in Handel's MESSIAH. Its message is a powerful word of hope, or what the old carol calls "tidings of comfort and joy." No wonder then that most every funeral service liturgy I know of includes this passage as a possible reading for a service of death and resurrection.

Yet as so often is the case, the original context of the passage is very different from our use of it, exemplified by the usage associated with a funeral, in the midst of personal situations of pain and grief and loss. Because, you see, Isaiah's words were not spoken to an individual, but to a whole people, to a nation. The people of sixth-century B.C. Israel had lost their temple, had lost their city Jerusalem and all that it symbolized, and had lost their land; and their leaders had been carted off into exile in what has

come to be known as the Babylonian Captivity.

A word about the book we call Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters of the book of Isaiah are attributed to a prophet scholars call "First Isaiah" because he delivered a word of warning and threats of God's judgment to the people of 8th century B.C.E. Jerusalem. But by the time of the words of Isaiah chapter 40 were written two hundred years later much has happened. By Second Isaiah's time, the Babylonian Empire has destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people off into captivity. It is a disaster. Along comes Second Isaiah to cry comfort to the people, to proclaim release and announce forgiveness and the promise of restoration and a great homecoming. Second Isaiah is all about hope, a hope rooted not in the people's strength or wits or goodness, but in the faithfulness of God. It's a

surprising, unexpected word of hope, and a challenging one as well.

Many of the Jewish people must have wondered where God had gone. They must have felt cut off from God, far away from God. But we know that people in every age have felt that distance caused by sin and guilt, and have struggled to reach across it. But the good news is: God never forgets God's people or the covenant God has with them. God is as persistent, faithful, and dependable as we are inconsistent, fleeting, and undependable, no matter what we promise or intend. Our faithfulness indeed is like the flower of the field, beautiful at the moment but rapidly failing when trouble and distraction come upon us. Second Isaiah reassures us of an "anyway" God, a God who loves us "anyway," even when we sin, even when we fall away; we can count on God's faithfulness anyway. We can count on the Word of God that "will stand forever" (v. 8).

Now I know that some people think of the God of the Old

Testament as a God of fear and threat, while the God of the New Testament seems to be all about love and tenderness. But Second Isaiah paints a fuller portrait of God than that. Yes, "the God who comes" is mighty and glorious and powerful. But "the God who comes" is also a gentle shepherd, feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms and carrying them close to his heart. Second Isaiah urges the people to make way for this good news in their lives, for a transformation of their situation. The powers that be, Babylon, have been overturned. The mighty have fallen, and the "little" people can dance with joy.

Now, all of this is good news for sure and the stuff of exceeding great joy, but it can also be pretty unbelievable when you're still sunk in despair under the heel of the oppressor. At his "ordination," Second Isaiah is told to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem" (v. 2). While the world has long ago started its celebrations, hung its decorations, planned its parties, started playing its music, and invading its malls to shop, in this

Advent season of reflection in the church our heads have some work to do before our hearts can be carried away by holiday cheer.

Just as the people of Israel long ago were told to clear a path for God, to make a way where there seemed to be no way, our text today tells us to make a way for God to come into our lives and into our world. We are told to remove the obstacles and impediments, to clear out the old animosities and grievances, to cut back the weeds of doubt and greed. We are told to open up our lives to transforming grace, not just to make a nice little bed for the newborn babe. In Advent, we must attune our hearts and minds to the many ways that God enters our lives and the life of the world, to find the holiness in the everyday. And once again I want us to remember that Isaiah spends very little time or ink on our private holiness and personal sins. He is much, much more concerned about the way we've collectively organized our lives. As Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write in THE FIRST

CHRISMTAS, a discussion of which we will revisit for two Sundays beginning next week at 9 a.m., "God's dream for us is not simply peace of mind, but peace on earth."

The dream and the promise of this text is a New Jerusalem, a homecoming to the great city restored. Yet here we are, thousands of years later, still experiencing loss in the face of war, poverty, violence, harm to God's beautiful creation, economic crisis, and hatred. As Walter Brueggeman writes, "The city as we know it is defeated and failed. Nobody believes that poverty or homelessness or crime or any of the other maladies can be answered. And indeed, they never will be, given the categories of imagination now operative" (The Word that Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship).

Way back around 600 B.C., Second Isaiah came along with a message that changed everything, with a message that "redescribes the world" as "under new management, under the

governance of the home-making, home-giving God and away from the deathly power of the empire." Perhaps this sounds like a comforting word, but I also think it is a disturbing word, a word that must have made Isaiah's hearers anxious, and quite frankly ought to make us anxious too.

You see, Israel is not asked to remember a past of self-sufficient achievement. Israel must remember how God does things, how God does things that turn our notions and ideas inside out and upside down. They in 600 B.C.E. and we in the 21st century think empire and weapons and economic might bring peace, but God calls us to "a future of complete shalom that is free of violence, brutality, competitiveness, and scarcity, a new governance that displaces that of empire." And this is a future which God's people must live into now, "a present tense filled with neighbors to whom we are bound in fidelity, in obligation, and in mutual caring," in justice for all, including "those that the empire finds objectionable and

unproductive." So you see, we are living in that meantime between God's coming in Jesus and Christ's coming in glory, and it does matter, it really does, how we organize our shared life together, in the face of the empires of materialism and militarism that surround us. We are to be a people who work for and live into a realm of peace, a time of harmony, a reign of shalom and justice where all our meager can-do achievements get scuttled and where our hell-bent desire to win at all costs is abandoned in favor of a larger vision, the vision of God.

This text is about evangelism. It is about what we here at Congregational UCC call Testament in our list of church values. These words of Isaiah are all about taking God's word and work into the world, no matter what the cost; these words are about preaching and living the good news of God's love and faithfulness, regardless of how daunting the challenge may be to witness against the empires of this world, including the one we live in.

As Brueggeman writes, "The birth of Jesus itself represents a decisive criticism of the dominant consciousness. The Lukan account of his solidarity with the poor and the Matthean presentation of his abrasive conflict with the powers that be...both point to the emergence of an alternative consciousness."

The words of Isaiah invite us to reflection. To what are we captive? Indeed, do we even think of ourselves as captives? Or as things go in this world, are we oppressors? As we look around at our culture, what forces press in on us both personally and communally? Do we feel far from home, exiled? Are living as Christians in an alien land? How do we need to be comforted and encouraged? How does the image of a gentle shepherd speak to our world, a world that tells us to succeed on our own, to grab and take hold of our share of the stuff, and to step on others and outlast them in order to reach our goals? How do Isaiah's words condemn us all as we rely on military might for the nation's security and a gun

in our home for our personal safety? How do faithful Christians reconcile the image of the shepherd with such a culture?

In this season of Advent, what are we preparing for? What sort of road needs to be cleared in our hearts and in our world in preparation for the coming of the One who shepherds us?

Advent is one tough season, and for good reason. It is not designed to get us ready for the babe in the manger, for someone we can hold and love and let sleep in our laps. Advent is designed and has been designed from its beginnings to get us ready for the Second Advent, for the coming of the Lord in glory to judge both the living and the dead, and after that, a new creation. Advent is not designed to get us ready for something we can see clearly now, but for something that seems impossible to see, and perhaps something that inspires more awe than "heavenly peace."

Isaiah's words are full of drama and prophetic action. But the truth is, Isaiah's words would probably not have been heard as very comforting to many of its first hearers unless, and this is huge, unless they had faith big enough to believe what could not be seen. Faith always challenges us to go beyond our present circumstances. Faith always invites us to be embraced by and follow the word of a God which we can not see. That's how I hear Isaiah's words today, where we are now.

Isaiah's instructions from God were to comfort the people, to speak tenderly to them, and to cry out with good news. My sisters and brothers, if ever there was a time when God's people needed to hear a word of comfort, it is now. There are so many parallels which can be drawn between Israel's shocked predicament and those that we face in our 21st century, flood-soaked, wind-shattered, war-torn quaking world. Like Israel, we still deal with age-old questions about the existence of evil; like Israel, some of us even

deal with doubts about the power or the purpose of God.

So we all need tender reminders that we are not forsaken and that God is not overthrown. But there is more. Once we have heard that tender reminder, we are called to move beyond our cozy huddles where we comfort one another out into the public arena with our testament to the home we have not in this world but in Christ and of what that means for our world and our lives. And our testimony is not just to the Jesus who has already come and whose birth we shall soon celebrate, but to the Christ who will come again in power and glory on that road we prepare to restore all things and reverse the world's lonely exile of sin and death.

It's Advent, and about all we can do is hope because hope is all we have left. We hope because God has already wrought the future. We hope because we are in on the action of building it. We hope because we eat and drink the meal that points us to come and die and live again...until he comes.

O come, O come,
Emmanuel, and ransom captive
Israel.

O come, thou Wisdom from
on high, and order all things far
and nigh.

O come, thou Dayspring,
come and cheer our spirits by thy
justice here.

O come, Desire of nations
bind all people in our heart and
mind.

Now that's a word of
comfort....real tidings of comfort
and joy.