

“Comfort and New Beginnings”

Advent 2B

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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John the Baptist wasn't the beginning. But it was a beginning. The Gospel of Mark opens in typical Markan brevity, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” No angels or shepherds. No long trek to Bethlehem where Jesus was born in a humble stable. Straight out of the gate in the first chapter, like a bell being rung at a horse race, Mark proclaims Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and by verse nine Jesus is getting baptized by John.

The beginning of the good news is off and running. John K. Stendahl, a Lutheran pastor, wrote about these first few passages of Mark, “To be at a beginning is to find that we are not prisoners of the past. John the Baptist announced as much. We and our blessed and foolish land need not be bound to our idolatries or regrets, our greeds or fears. We can begin again.” (2020) Beginnings are filled with the hope of things new. This doesn't mean that we must forget the past, for there are lessons to be learned from it. What it does mean is that the past doesn't prevent us from moving forward, from starting over, our slate wiped clean of those things that bound us, keeping us from becoming who God created us to be.

Our church year begins with the season of Advent, a season of hope and new beginnings. For us in the Northern Hemisphere, Advent begins as our hours of daylight get shorter and shorter. There are times when seven o'clock at night feels more like midnight. As the darkness of night closes in, we look to things that bring comfort. We snuggle into blankets. Our meals are filled with comfort foods- typically loaded with carbs, but oh, so good! Some of us might find ourselves sitting in a chair that fits us just right, as we watch flames dance in the fireplace. These creature comforts not only help us feel better but give us hope that the light will overcome the darkness.

Our reading from Isaiah opens with “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” He spoke these words to the people of Israel during the Babylonian exile as their captivity was finally coming to an end. During their long exile, they had become blind to the presence of God. They felt and thought that God had abandoned them. This blindness and the feeling of abandonment isn't unique to the Israelites thousands of years ago. It is a feeling experienced by many people through the ages, into 2023 and beyond.

Isaiah's words of "comfort" reminds us that God is present with us always, even when we think otherwise. God is there to give us strength. He gives us hope when all hope seems lost. When no one else will listen, God is ready and waiting to hear all you have to say, to enfold you in a spiritual hug filled with warmth and love.

Isaiah's words are also about deliverance from our exiles and being set free to find a way home to God. He goes on to tell the people of Israel that their journey home wouldn't be a convoluted wandering of forty years but on a straight highway. Thinking of this in more modern terms, their flight home wasn't going to involve multiple layovers in airports that aren't even on the quickest driving route to their destination, they had a direct flight home.

The Israelites suffered exile from their home country, but just as there are many different types of apocalypses, as Fr. Joseph shared with us last Sunday, there are many different types of exile, both big and small. These exiles can be emotional or physical; self-imposed or forced upon us. The result is the same- a separation from home, the place where we feel safe and loved. No matter where we are, God is our home.

Isaiah makes finding our way home sound simple, a non-stop ticket. But when we look at all the obstacles that life tosses into our path, finding our way home to God doesn't seem so simple. It can feel more like the path is all over the place. As one of the more popular memes says- "My ducks are absolutely not in a straight row. I don't even know where some of them are, and I'm pretty sure one of them is a pigeon." Life is messy.

But as John the Baptist declares, our deliverance, our way home, is through the one who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit- Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The shepherd who searches for the one missing sheep, even the ducks and pigeons, and gathers them up in his loving arms and brings them home. The comforter who consoles us in our brokenness. The one who brings the light into the darkness of our souls and deepest fears. Christ, our Redeemer, brings us new life so that we can begin again.

We don't walk this path alone. God is with us. The Light of Christ that breaks through the darkness of our lives heralds the dawn of new joys and new possibilities. We have become part of the story that begins in the Gospel of Mark. Remember he writes, "The beginning of the good news..." Nowhere in Mark does the good news ever end. Christ will come again. Until then, we are called to continue the story of the good news by preparing the way of the Lord. We proclaim his life, death, and resurrection through our words and actions.

We are the prophets bringing comfort to a Jerusalem that is no longer confined to one city or one people. Jerusalem is the entirety of the world around us, filled with God's children of all backgrounds and colors. Through us, God responds to the cries and concerns of the world. God isn't somewhere 'up there' out of reach and out of touch but down here, with us, amongst us. You have only to turn around to see Christ because Christ is in the people around you. He works through us. We are the hands and feet of Christ, continuing the sacred story that begins with the birth of Jesus, the Son of God who descended from heaven to become one us, joining himself to our lives.

During the season of Advent and beyond, we are called to comfort God's people. The more you look, the more you will see people who need someone to believe in them. People who need someone to care for them or a place to call home. People who feel forgotten. Every time we reach out to comfort others, even if it is just a simple act of kindness, we are preparing the way of the Lord. We are fulfilling the Advent promise that a light shines in the darkness bringing hope to the world.

God calls to us, "Comfort, comfort ye my people. Speak ye peace....Comfort those who sit in darkness...Speak ye to Jerusalem, of the peace that waits for them; tell her that her sins I cover, and her warfare now is over....the kingdom now is here...For the glory of the Lord now o'er earth is shed abroad; and all flesh shall see the token that the word is never broken." (Hymn 67, The Hymnal 1982)

Amen

Works Cited

- Olearius, Johann G., translator Catherine Winkworth and Composer Claude Goudimel; Music: Psalm 42. "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People." Hymnal, Church. *The Hymnal 1982*. Church Pension Fund, 1985. 67.
- Stendahl, John K. "On Your Mark." *Christian Century* (Nov. 20, 2020).