

The Prophetic Voice

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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When we hear certain phrases from the Biblical text, sometimes what has happened with those words later – especially when they have been put to music – has a deep effect on us. And it may hold a far deeper meaning than the words themselves.

The opening words that we heard from the prophet Isaiah, “*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God,*” are words that I literally put to music – either with the opening hymn that we sang today or from parts of Handel’s “Messiah.” The music has in some ways taken over the spirit of these words, as I cannot read or say them without hearing the music. And the same is true with the words that we heard from the Gospel of Mark, “*Prepare the way of the Lord,*” that in addition we literally did hear sung this morning from the musical Godspell. Again, I can’t read or say those words without hearing that tune.

The Gospel of Mark quotes from the prophet Isaiah, so we are hearing that prophetic voice twice. And, that particular prophetic voice that we so often hear as one of harshness and judgment has now turned soft and gentle. It challenges that age-old assumption about the God of the Old Testament being far less likable than the God of the New Testament. How can you not like a God that will “*gently lead the mother sheep*”? Our church school curriculum, Seasons of the Spirit, offers a helpful insight about this transition. It offers this commentary:

The book of Isaiah contains at least three sections, each speaking in and out of a particular era in Israel’s history. The first 39 chapters, dating from the 8th century BCE, are a series of warnings of coming disaster for the people of Judah. Chapter 40 begins the section of God’s word to the Judahites after their kingdom fell in 586 BCE. At that time many people were carried into exile in Babylon, perhaps even the prophet who delivers this message.

After years in Babylon, many Hebrew exiles had built homes and established comfortable lives there. But empires rise and fall, and Cyrus of Persia came to threaten Babylon. Cyrus was thought to be more tolerant of the Hebrew exiles. There was hope for a new beginning. In Isaiah 40:1-11, the prophet speaks to persuade the exiles to go back to Jerusalem. Cyrus will be God’s instrument in fostering their return. Indeed, Cyrus eventually did provide for rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple.

And it concludes:

In this passage, God sits in the midst of the divine council and speaks a message of comfort to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem. Their suffering is coming to an end; they have paid double the penalty for their sins – their defiant acts against God’s ways. The exiles hope there will be a way for them to return to the land of promise. The prophet calls on the leaders of the people to prepare this “way of the Lord,” to make possible the return of God’s people.

So it would seem, then, that the prophetic voice can be nuanced to suit the occasion. It can be harsh and judgmental or it can be quiet and encouraging. In this middle section of the book of Isaiah, the voice seems to be telling those in exile – even though many of them have grown comfortable – to come home. Remember who and whose you are.

Babylon would have been seductive. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world – the hanging gardens of Babylon – would indicate that it was a wealthy and comfortable culture. I think that this reality is what is going on with phrases that, on the surface, seem out of place in the text. Especially the phrases “*the grass withers*” and “*the flower fades.*” The message from the prophetic voice would seem to be saying that the pleasant present surroundings are no match for the constant love and covenant with God. Even in exile. Even with years of waiting. Even with the greatest patience. Even when God feels more absent than present. The voice tells them that this Babylonian culture is not your culture. Come home. Babylon is not where you belong.

Exile and waiting and patience are some of the themes that we, too, understand in this season of Advent. It is very much like a pregnancy – parallel to the story of Mary’s pregnancy with Jesus. And it can feel frustrating because we know the outcome – just get it over with. Go ahead and sing the Christmas carols now, we might wish. But in order to achieve anything of depth or quality – there needs to be a significant period of formation, of gestation, of brewing, of incubation, of ripening, of simmering, of waiting. Whether it be for a healthy baby, a new understanding, a work of art, a reconciliation, or simply a well-cooked meal; these different aspects of waiting are both needed and necessary.

A prophetic voice today might challenge us on the many ways that we try to banish waiting from our lives, and our seemingly desperate need for instant gratification.

The voice might also tell us to let God be God. We are not the ones in charge.

UCC theologian Walter Brueggemann writes in [Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World](#), that the truth about the story of the Hebrew people – in and out of exile – is that they should remember “a past that is saturated with life-giving miracles, not a past filled with self-sufficient achievement.”

Let’s hear his thinking again:

“A past that is saturated with life-giving miracles, not a past filled with self-sufficient achievement.” In a post-election campaign season where we have been promised literally anything and everything, these are important words to ponder. Our status in the world is of a people of great power and privilege, with freedoms that we take for granted and that others covet, who usually only speak one language while others sometimes need to know several, and who live with an out-of-proportion high usage of resources and percentage of wealth

The lowest common denominator in politics would say that we have these things because we are Americans. That God blesses us and our country. That, like the image of ancient Israel, we are a “city on a hill” setting an example to others. But if we honestly look at the story of the ancient

Hebrew people through the lens of “a past that is saturated with life-giving miracles, not a past filled with self-sufficient achievement,” how much of this is just plain luck? How much of this is God’s doing? And, if so, it is never ours to hoard because it all ultimately belongs to God.

The prophetic voice is still within and among us. It asks us those questions that we are often unwilling to face on our own. To what are we held captive? Are we oppressed or oppressors or both? Do we offer comfort or do we hoard comfort? Are we in exile or are we home?

And more specifically, in today’s reading from Isaiah, how does the image of a gentle shepherd leading the mother sheep work in a secular world that tells us to succeed and to own and to acquire, to step on others and outlast them in order to reach our goals, to rely on military might for our nation’s security and a gun in our home for our personal safety? How do we as faithful Christians reconcile the image of the gentle shepherd with such a culture?

In this season of Advent, what are we preparing for? What are we waiting for? What do we hope for? What do we fear? What needs to be cleared in our hearts in preparation for the coming of the One who will shepherd us?

Later in this worship service we will celebrate communion together. We will hear the words “the bread of life” and “the cup of hope.” May these words, as well as the simple sharing of this sacrament together, be one way for us of receiving the comfort that we long for, the strength to face the questions that we often avoid, and the patience to wait and to prepare. It is Advent, and we, a people, are pregnant. Amen.

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.
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!"
See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."