

“Words of Comfort”

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Each advent, year after year, we read texts from the prophet Isaiah. Again, and again, we hear words from the ancient past that call us to prepare ourselves for an unknown future.

Last week, We heard Isaiah’s cry to God. A lament begging the Lord to return to the people in exile and return them to their former glory.

Today, God responds, calling Isaiah to preach to the people.

And what is Isaiah called to preach? Words of Comfort. Words that remind the people that God is with them, and that God is real. The constancy of the people might be as grass - blooming one day and faded the next, but the word of God will stand forever.

As you may remember, the Babylonian exile is a deeply formative period in our faith. God’s people have been defeated in battle, and are taken from their homes and families and all that they know and love, and are brought to a new land, where nothing is familiar or comfortable.

It was a time of incredible soul-searching for our great-grandparents in the faith, 500 years before the birth of Christ. Many of our biblical texts were written during the time of exile as God’s people reexamined who they were and who God was calling them to be.

And Isaiah was their prophet. God chooses Isaiah to speak comfort to the people in exile who believed they had been forgotten.

Would that we had such a prophet today.

In our ongoing history as people of faith, we’ve had our ups and downs when it comes to believing that God is with us, that God hears us, and that God loves us.

Just as the exiles in Babylon cried out for God to be made known to them, so did the people in Jesus’ time long for an encounter with God in the flesh. Just as the Protestant reformers desired better relationship, a direct relationship with God, rather than through mediators of the church, so too, I believe we are in an age where so many are crying out, seeking a deeper connection to God and all that is holy in our day as well.

We are in an age of such uncertainty. Institutions that have seemingly brought consistency and stability to the world are failing and falling. Trust is broken around every corner.

The younger generations have demonstrated again and again that they are not finding meaning and connection in long-established places and spaces, but are seeking the holy outside the walls of the church.

How do we find it? How do we connect with the creator of heaven and earth, the holy one? How do we quell the longing in our own lives for a word, a touch, a recognition of God's presence in our lives?

The advent season seems to draw these questions into sharper and sharper focus.

The world calls us to shop and to buy, to decorate and create. To plan and party and run ourselves ragged baking and wrapping and prepping and planning.

But more and more I hear folks asking, is this what it's all about?

The more irreverent of my friends have begun calling Christmas "giftmas" in a nod to the fact that the secular celebration of the season seems to be entirely materialistic. And in the midst of it all, I find myself looking at our holy texts.

And there it is, writ large. Not just in the birth stories, which we instinctively want to fast-forward to, but in the readings for advent. The assurances from the prophets that God is still with us.

Prepare the way.

Prepare the way, God tells Isaiah. Prepare the way, John tells the people of his time. Prepare the way, we read and hear and understand. Prepare the way for the Prince of peace.

This second Sunday of advent is traditionally the Sunday of peace, and I have been inspired and encouraged this week by the writings of Talitha Arnold, who says, "*to be true shalom – meaning not just the absence of conflict but the fullness of life – peace needs righteousness... that is, right relations, be they with God, with others, in our families, or among nations. Sometimes we call it justice. But for that righteousness or justice to be more than legalistic fairness, it needs the breadth of fairness found in God's shalom.*"

There is more to the season than buying and wrapping gifts.

The season of Advent is about preparing our hearts and preparing our world for the coming of Christ into both.

Not just the child in the manger, but the adult Jesus who calls us to greater understanding of God and God's will for us. We must prepare ourselves by seeking peace touched by justice.

Elsewhere Arnold writes,

Both Bethlehem's manger and Calvary's cross are signs of salvation for us. But so is the life lived in between, in all the ways Jesus made flesh those words of love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace. Moreover, for Christians, salvation is not just believing in Jesus Christ, but embodying what he embodied in this world. When steadfast love and faithfulness meet in our lives, when righteousness and peace embrace in our business practices, our family relations, or our nation's policies, God's salvation is near at hand. When we work for justice, we make way for God in our world.

So comfort, comfort, my people, the Lord is near. Let us prepare the way for God's entrance into our lives.

Let us live in right relationship with God and one another. Let us seek the paths God is calling us to, as individuals and as a community of faith.

By hearing the stories of our past, by sharing our stories of faith today, through rite and ritual, practice and praise, we come to know God's presence with us, and live that presence out in our dealings with others.

Soon, we will join together in the sacrament of communion, which draws us together as one people. This symbolic act of eating and drinking at this table reminds us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

This table calls us to community and sharing in ways we often forget.

As we come to the table this morning, let us come offering our whole hearts and all of our lives, reaching out for the elements that make us one.

And so refreshed by bread and cup, may we go out preaching comfort and peace to a broken and hurting world.

Amen.