

Hope
Isaiah 40:1-11
Wilton Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shannon A White
November 29, 2020

Finally, the season of Advent is here. This is the season which gives us liturgical words to what we have been facing most of this year... we wait for the coming of the Christ child... the one who promises to come to us where we are, in all of our humanity, in all of what we are experiencing, and give us... not a way out... but a way through the depths of our human pain and suffering to a life of deep and abiding Hope, Love, Joy and Peace.

What we are facing in these days of pandemic is not new. Humankind has faced years upon years of struggle in differing ways. And each generation has always made it through... with the help of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote to the Jewish people, the children of Israel, in the midst of their exile... when they had been driven away from their home in the kingdom of Judah and held captive in Babylonia under King Nebuchadnezzar II, beginning around 600 BCE and finally ending around 538 BCE—that's 62 years.

As Susan DeGeorge reminded those who gathered for Bible Study these past few weeks, Isaiah is divided into what is thought to be 3 sections, known as first, second and third Isaiah... what scholars say are 3 different perspectives from 3 different traditions of thought. First Isaiah was harsh and uttered a condemning voice to the people. In both second and third Isaiah, the voice is much more compassionate and consoling.

Today's text comes from second Isaiah. We begin with the words:

Comfort, O Comfort my people says your God... speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

A voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord!

Yes, these are tender and compassionate words, which they... and WE need to hear, but while poetic and soothing... they also tell us a stark truth...

This is a word for **all** people... and a word of justice... the text continues:

Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level.

While that word may not sit well with some, truth in the midst of hardship can be reassuring. There are safeguards to the very human tendencies we all have to want to make life better just for ourselves and those whom we love. And, in times like these in 2020, our disconnection from one another only increases our human tendency to protect and preserve our own.

In some ways, we have been exiled from one another and the rhythms of life which help us feel settled have been disrupted. There has been a great even-ing of pain across the human experience. The rich AND the poor have suffered and continue to suffer although perhaps in different ways.

But rather than to continue to pronounce judgment for peoples' actions... Isaiah saw that this softer tone was more easily received.

As one scholar puts it: "It reminds me of what people have been saying about how shaming people into wearing masks just doesn't work. No matter how defiant one is, we are still deep-down scared. We are sick of the bad news but denying it doesn't make it go away. So, comfort is where Isaiah goes. God is giving us hope for tomorrow. "Speak tenderly" – for example... understand one another's deep pain that comes out in

strange ways that we ourselves don't fully understand. When we begin to listen, we begin to understand, when we hear each other's pain, we are motivated to do the right thing for each other." (Dr. Marcia McFee, Worship design Studio)

That's what we hope for... that we can be a part of something beautiful and lasting which stretches beyond ourselves.

Our Christian faith is about transformation (that's what we celebrate at Easter each year). It's **not about** layering joy and love... leading to exuberant faith... on top of the denial of the reality of just how bad it is right now, so that we may feel good in the short term... we believe in a God who comes to us---in flesh and blood---and who transforms us... literally changes us from the inside out... breaking our hearts open... through the power of the Spirit... when we look at the long lines of those waiting for food and don't turn away, but stand alongside our brothers and sisters in need; **when we embrace the reality that THEY are US...** when we acknowledge the severity of this deadly disease and care for one another through it... feeling the pain and suffering of those in our midst... and when we realize, as people of privilege, that there are real injustices in our world... the same world which God calls us to confront and change... knowing "For every valley shall be lifted up and the mountains be brought low."

How in the world do we do that? Here's where the word of hope comes in. This season is about God... Emmanuel... which means: God with us. God does not expect us to do what we cannot fathom on our own... but God promises to be with us each and every step of the way, guiding us as we open up to love beyond what we thought was humanly possible.

That promise gives me great hope... hope for change in me, in those I love, in our church community, in our region, in our country and in our world. As it has been said, "the only way out is through."

Hope... even when it seems the sun isn't shining~~

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this poem at Harvard on Christmas Day in 1863 during the heart of the Civil War. His wife had died tragically in a fire and he had just found out that his son had been injured as a soldier for the Union. He heard the sound of bells [handbells begin to ring softly] and began to write, spurred on by his sorrow at the state of humankind:

*"And in despair, I bowed my head:
'There is no peace on earth,' I said,
'For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

And yet hope wins out as he pens the fourth verse:

*"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth [not] sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to [all]."*

Indeed, "The history of humanity is fraught with pain—especially the pain that comes accompanied by fear and leads to oppression and violence of one people against another. This is the world into which Jesus was born and through which his teachings would challenge and call for transformation. We're still in that place, aren't we... living in pain and fear, which can lead us to oppress one another.

The opening words from this morning's service which our choir sang are those of an anonymous Jewish poet:

"I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining,"

were scrawled on a wall during the Holocaust. That is the theme song from the series we are using... which will carry us through the season of Advent this year... “for our season calls us to examine our penchant for annihilating fear by annihilating each other. The power of scriptural narrative and music will call us to a different response—transformation and reconciliation through hope, love, joy, and peace. This Advent and Christmas, let us fill night and day with music and light and affirm and act on the reasons why we can still “believe, even when” we are discouraged.

And so we live into hope~~