

Comfort and Promise

December 6, 2020

I really love Advent. It's my favorite season of the church year—the BLUE season, and the new season. Happy New Year!

One of the bands that I played in—called the Groove Daemons (that's Daemon—which is the Greek word for "Powers," so we were the Groove Powers—played a song written by our guitar player (who is now a Professor at Wartburg Lutheran Seminary) called "The Blue Season." It was, of course, a blues—and it extolled the depths to be found in this time of waiting. We are in between; in the shadows. We move slowly. We can savor the darkness. We can find solace in slivers of light, shards of frost covering the grasses, crystalized windows, a frozen lake off which the pale blue sky reflects true beauty when the sky is clear. The blue season is my favorite season of the year.

To me, it's a time of depth, of comfort and coziness and new beginnings, promise and hope—especially during a pandemic.

And yet, I don't know about you, but I'm really glad that 2020 is on its way out. It's been a time of exile for all of us, hasn't it? We're exiled from each other, and that means in some very real way we are exiled from ourselves. I've quoted John Donne to you before, I know: Nobody is an island, we're all part of the main.

And I feel the absences in my life acutely, don't you? Maybe those absences aren't just from the pandemic. Maybe they're absences from a broken relationship. Maybe they are absences from a death. Pining is, I'm coming to realize the older I grow, at the heart of the human condition. As Saint Augustine put it: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." This blue season can make that longing for others, longing that may be impossible to fulfill, acute. I do hope, if that resonates at all with you, that you'll join us for our "Longest Night" service, on December 21st at 7 p.m. I think it will be a service to bring comfort in this time of exile.

And comfort, o comfort, my people, says our God. Isaiah 40 is the first chapter in what Biblical scholars call SECOND Isaiah. Based on the literary style and contextual references, scholars have helped us to recognize that there are two (some say three) sections to what is now the singular book of Isaiah. The first section, Chapters 1-39, are written to call the people of Israel (living in the Southern Kingdom known as Judah) to account for the fact of its exile to Babylon, which we know from extra-biblical sources happened in 587 or 586 BCE.

Now, conquest in the ancient world was not a pleasant experience. In the case of Jerusalem, the city was laid siege for a year or 18 months, during which the people who were living inside the walled city experienced terrible deprivation. After Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar broke through the city wall, he plundered all of the property, laid waste to the city—including Solomon's Temple, collected the elite (the men and women who survived), and took them hostage and loaded the booty onto wagons and made the march back to Babylon, leaving behind in Jerusalem a Governor and a few people to care for the land. In a nod to what kind of conditions existed for those who survived the

conquest, that Governor—Gedaliah, was assassinated two months later, after which the few surviving Jews fled to Egypt.

So that's the world of First Isaiah, who described the conditions that led to this decimation as follows (in Chapter 5): "Ah, woe to you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Ah, woe to you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight! ... Ah, woe to you who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights! ... Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will become rotten, and their blossom go up like dust; for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

That's First Isaiah: the leaders have been lying, taking bribes, imagining themselves as wise, depriving the innocent of their rights, calling evil good and good evil. They despise truth, despise reality, despise God and other people.

Does that sound like anybody you can think of?

So, the exile lasted for 4 years; no, 50 years; 50! ...and the exile ended when the Persian (modern day Iranian) King Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and released the Jews from their exile. Most made their way home gradually, where under the Governor Zerubbabel—now there's a name you don't hear much anymore, Zerubbabel!—under Zerubbabel (I had to say it again) the Temple was rebuilt in 516.

And so, what SECOND Isaiah brings to these exiles returning after 50 years, is Comfort, O Comfort my people, says our God. This is our God: a comforter. So, let me ask: what are you doing for comfort these days, as we slowly, carefully, make our way home from exile? If you're following along on Facebook Live, let's share with each other some of the ways we are finding comfort (only the legal and moral ones fit for public consumption, please!) Go ahead—I'll pause for a little bit to let you listen to each other.

At our house we have been having lots of fires in the fireplace. Our white cat Layla will find the fire and invariably splay herself out on the threshold—right in front of the flames, rolling over and luxuriating in the heat, while Lisa and I sit on the couch wrapped in a comforter, maybe rubbing each others' feet, watching the TV on the wall above the flames.

Since I haven't been feeling great for the past few weeks, we've been spending a lot of time watching TV in the evenings. Over the course of about three weeks we blew through the entire run of "Schitt's Creek" (yes, kids, I said Schitts)—and I find myself missing the zany antics and quirky and loving characters created by the Levy family. Talk about comfort!

We also, in the same vein, really enjoyed "The Queen's Gambit." Such beautiful, poignant character development! It won't give anything away to share that the main character struggles, like many, with substance abuse and recovery. Definitely comfort.

And, of course, we have watched every Packers game. Today they play the Eagles (so I'll keep this brief)—but whenever those two teams play, under different conditions, I would be there in the stands, somehow, someway. So, comfort, yes, but also underneath the comfort there is that undercurrent of pining—of absence, no? I know

that's particularly acute for those of you who attend games regularly. TV is great, but it's not Lambeau, is it?

And Second Isaiah addresses that pining for us too, I think. "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."

Man, that's bleak, huh? Or—it's realistic. I look at my gardens every day during my morning walk with Theo: "the grass withers, the flower fades."

But the word of God endures forever. Ah, there's the promise. And who is this God? What does this God do?

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, of the United States: "Here is your God!"

This is a God we can TRUST. A God who doesn't lie. A God who is strong, bringing reward, offering recompense—which is a fancy word for benefit-in-relationship. This is a God who loves us.

Our God is a God, Isaiah goes on, who feeds us like a mother, who gathers us like a hen gathers her chicks, who carries us in swaddling clothes, who gently leads us in paths of righteousness, even through a valley of the shadow of death.

This is our God: Love incarnate, love come down at Christmas, love, o love, divine.

That's our promise, and our tradition—from Second Isaiah through John the Baptist, down to us.

Yes, we have been in exile—we pine, we feel absence, we long for each other.

But we have this promise—O Come, O Come, Emmanuel—and ransom captive Israel...

As John the Baptizer put it—we can be baptized with water by human beings—and that baptism is a beautiful and holy thing. But in, with, and under that water is the Living Spirit, who cannot be quenched, because that Living Spirit is like breath itself, like darkness that falls on a December afternoon, like light that gleams from the tree in the corner, or light that glitters in icicles hanging from the eaves, or light that shines from a single star in the moonlit sky.

We have this comfort and promise through the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who will go so far as to endure exile for us, to die for us, to offer us no less than his body and blood around a table set with bread and wine, FOR US.

Comfort and Promise. May it be so.

And all God's people say? Amen.

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