

December 10th: Comfort

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Before we dig into our text, let’s pray together.

*God our Comfort,
Like our ancient brothers and sisters in faith, we too grapple with difficult
circumstances and uncertain futures. Like our spiritual ancestors, we feel
immense grief and confusion over the conflicts, wars, and exiles that we inflict
upon each other. Like your people in captivity, we yearn for your comforting*

voice, and we pray for good news that will set us free into more hopeful, more peaceful ways of being. Speak to us now, we pray. Amen.

Last week I mentioned that our Advent texts will take us on a journey through the writings of our Old Testament prophets because this need for a Messiah cannot be separated from these experiences of invasion and exile.

We began our journey with the promises of Jeremiah, and now today we return to the tumultuous setting of the early 6th century, but we will find ourselves a few years into the future. Our prophet for this morning, a man named Isaiah, is also a resident of the southern kingdom of Judah, and was also a witness to the siege of Jerusalem. He begins his ministry a few years after Jeremiah concludes his, in a time when the tribes of Judah have in fact been conquered and their community has been taken into exile in Babylon. The time for battle has passed, and now all that remains is captivity.

Into this disorienting situation of foreign occupation, our prophet Isaiah speaks. In fact, Isaiah goes with the exiled people of Judah, he travels with them into Babylonian territory, and he remains with them as they adjust to life in a new place and in an unfamiliar culture. While living in the city of Babylon, Isaiah receives prophecies that he is instructed by God to share with his fellow exiles. And like Jeremiah, he tries to impart some good news in the midst of these challenging times.

I think we could all use some good news this morning, so let's take a closer look at Isaiah's words for us this morning.

Verse 1 begins with this famous declaration, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

In these opening lines, Isaiah tells God's people that their time of suffering will come to an end: there is light at the end of this very dark tunnel. And instead

of continuing to be punished for the sins of their ancestors, God's people will soon receive double all that they have lost.

Verses 3 through 5 continue with this prophetic statement: "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"

If you've been through an Advent season before, or if you're familiar with our upcoming New Testament texts, you might remember that this is the passage from which our first century characters draw much of their inspiration. In fact, we'll read about one of those characters in two weeks, so for now, consider this a bit of foreshadowing! In these verses, we hear about a powerful voice with a powerful message. And this voice speaks about a shifting reality that needs to take place in order for the Messiah to arrive. In this new reality, even the land itself expresses how significant this moment is—this idea that valleys are raised up and mountains are brought low speaks to this sense that something huge and cosmic is happening. This idea that rough ground will become level, or that rugged places will turn into farmable fields is a sign that something truly miraculous is about to take place. All of creation is signaling that a massive transformation is on the horizon.

In verse 9, Isaiah gives some instructions—he says, "You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

So not only with this future voice in the wilderness speak to God's plans for restoration, but everyone who hears this good news should do the same. Anyone who listens to God's words of comfort is instructed to not be afraid, to shout from the rooftops that God is coming to soothe the hearts of his people.

Everyone who receives this divine message has a part to play in sharing it with the world.

Our passage for today ends with this image of divine embrace from verse 11–Isaiah writes, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”

We heard a few weeks ago that our Old Testament prophets use this language of a divine parent to describe God’s actions towards his children—we read about a God who teaches his children to walk by holding their hands, or holding them close to his cheek, leaning down to cradle them in his arms. And in this passage we have God as a loving shepherd, who gathers his beloved children in his strong arms, and carries them against his chest.

I think many of us are familiar with this type of comfort—we can all remember a time when a loved one tenderly carried us to bed, or a time when we received a hug at just the right moment, or a time when someone reached out to hold our hand in theirs. If we stop to think about it, we can recall a moment when a parent gently put a bandaid on a wound, or a moment when a friend brushed our hair, or a moment when our partner rubbed our feet after a long day. This may be a very human experience, but God speaks this language of touch over and over again, reminding us that caring for our physical bodies is part of how God engages with us and expresses his love.

As you might be able to tell, our chosen verb for the week ahead is: comfort. And like last week’s verb, I think our application is two-fold, meaning that I think there’s two ways that we should be focusing on using this verb.

First, I invite each of us to consider what kind of comfort we are most in need of right now. In doing this, you might find time to pray this week, or to meditate on your own personal journey of faith. You might ask yourself, “what do I most long to hear from God?” or “what am I most needing from God in this season of my life?” After some soul searching, you might discover that you are

most seeking deep connection, or a sense of reassurance, or relief from shame, or the healing of a longtime wound. You might learn that you are seeking a fresh start, or more wisdom about how to handle a situation, or a listening ear for when you are overwhelmed. You might identify that you are in need of comforting words, or comforting touch, or comforting community to surround you. Sometimes discerning your own needs in the midst of the chaos of life can be difficult, but if you don't know what your needs are, you can't ask for the help that God and others want to give and are ready to share. And God is indeed ready to listen, or to embrace you, or to be with you in your search for answers. God is indeed preparing to send us Jesus, who will be present with us to soothe us, and heal us, and teach us his ways.

And then, after you have discerned your own needs of comfort, I challenge you to ask someone else what they are needing in this season. I challenge you to listen deeply to the words of someone else and to offer comfort to someone else just like God does for us—this could mean that you offer to stand in solidarity, to witness their grief, to share in a moment of connection, or whatever else that might look like for them. I challenge you to bring peace to someone else's anxious mind, or be tender with their story, or pursue justice together as siblings in faith. I challenge you to offer something that the world needs most—maybe it's vulnerability, or maybe it's compassion, or maybe it's the gift of your undivided attention.

My friends, as we experience God's divine comfort, and as we extend that comfort to others, we are part of God's good news of the coming Messiah. As we experience God's peace deep in our souls, and as we share that peace with siblings in need, we prepare the way for Jesus to come to us and transform our world.

Amen.