

“*Comfort and Joy*”

Isaiah 40.1–11

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I'd like to start with a question: What is the primary medium through which you get the news? Perhaps if I asked this question even five years ago, I would get a different answer. How many of you read a newspaper either in paper form or online? How many of you consider a news magazine like *Time* or *The Week* as the primary way you get the news? How many of you listen to radio as your primary news source? How about television news? How about from an online-only source like BuzzFeed or a news aggregator like Flipboard? How many of you rely on social media like Facebook for your news?

I'd like to ask another question: How many of you find the news more upsetting, disquieting, overwhelming, anxiety-inducing, and downright scary than you did, say, two years ago?

One of the things I notice in myself as I have shifted from sitting down at breakfast with the morning paper...a physical paper...and reading it online is the pace and flow of my consumption of the news. When you read a newspaper or a news magazine you are entirely in control of the pace of your reading. If you start to feel overwhelmed by the grief or anger of yet another woman who has been subjected to sexual harassment, you can pause, ponder, think about its context, and come back to the story. But if you are getting your news online and have sat down at the computer to read a story in the *New York Times*, you are less likely to take a pause to think, to consider, and to finish your cup of coffee. Electronic media – even good journalism, which seems to be in decline – stream at you and demand your attention in the way that paper sources do not. And that likely results in a sense of being overwhelmed by sensationalism, by inflammatory tweets, and by “entertainment” news that doesn't really matter. And no matter how we get the news, the content itself seems more daunting every day.

In her address accepting a lifetime achievement award from the National Book Award, author Annie Proulx last month offered a stinging and truthful summation of what we together confront:

“We don't live in the best of all possible worlds. This is a Kafkaesque time. The television sparkles with images of despicable political louts and sexual harassment reports. We cannot look away from the pictures of furious elements, hurricanes and fires, from the repetitive crowd murders by gunmen burning with rage. We are made more anxious by flickering threats of nuclear war. We observe social media's manipulation of a credulous population, a population dividing into bitter tribal cultures. We are living through a massive shift from representative democracy to something called viral direct democracy, now cascading over us in a garbage-laden tsunami of raw data. Everything is situational, seesawing between gut-response 'likes' or vicious confrontations. For some this is a heady time of brilliant technological innovation that is bringing us into an

exciting new world. For others it is the opening of a savagely difficult book without a happy ending.

“To me the most distressing circumstance of the new order is the accelerating destruction of the natural world and the dreadful belief that only the human species has the inalienable right to life and God-given permission to take anything it wants from nature, whether mountaintops, wetlands or oil.”¹

You may be wondering what this has to do with Advent.

Listen to how one Old Testament scholar describes the setting for today’s scripture: “Events moved at a dizzying speed for the Jewish people between 550 and 515 BCE, the period of thirty-five years that produced” this section of the book of Isaiah. You will remember that this is the period when a significant number of the best and brightest of the Jewish people were taken into captivity and exile in Babylon. “The crises of those years would have tested even the most robust and secure of communities. But the Jewish community of”² that time was neither robust nor secure. Even though they may have had been economically prosperous during that portion of the exile, their spiritual alienation was profound. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel!”

It doesn’t sound so very far off from where you and I find ourselves as we begin this trek through Advent this year. Some of us are enjoying a record-setting stock market; some of us will benefit from the tax plan the Senate passed yesterday, whether or not we oppose or support it; Colorado has a historically low 2.7% unemployment rate. But we all understand in our gut that something is not right. We are a people in exile. “O come, O come, Emmanuel!”

Many in our nation may be enjoying material prosperity, but it comes as we face an environmental crisis of unparalleled proportions and it comes on the backs of those laboring in sweatshops in China and the developing world and in fields from California to Florida. We have a profound spiritual problem in this nation if we think the situation is acceptable.

So, where do we turn? Where do we find comfort and joy in the face of a tsunami of bad news and injustice? Listen to the prophet: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain... 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... 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.”

I was struck by what I heard in two separate conversations last week with members of our congregation. One woman, who is quite politically active, told me that Plymouth is the one place in her life that is a source of strength right now. One man who is experiencing a rough time with his family said that he comes to worship because it is

¹ reprinted at <http://www.vulture.com/2017/11/annie-proulx-national-book-award-speech.html>

² Paul D. Hanson, *Interpretation: Isaiah 40–66*. (Phila.: WJK Press, 1995), p. 1

the one hour a week when he can calm himself and just be at peace. “O Come, O come, Emmanuel!”

And when I see our teens sleeping out on Plymouth’s front lawn for the 13th consecutive year to raise funds and awareness, I am warmed and given hope. Their efforts have an immediate impact, and the sleepout also helps to inform who these young people are becoming and where their priorities lie. Whether they know it or not, our teens are bringing us and others comfort and joy!

When we are planning worship at Plymouth, we don’t use a whole lot of electronic media, especially in the morning, in part because we want it to be a time when spiritual renewal can take place. So **welcome** to live, handcrafted, artisanal, free-range, no hormones added worship! I hope that it brings you joy!

I know that part of the DNA of our congregation is **doing** and acting for justice, and I also hope that each of us can take comfort and deep joy from our faith and from the presence of God within and among us. “O Come, O come Emmanuel!”

In their dialogic *Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu conclude that our pursuit for outward happiness based on things and accomplishments ultimately results in dissatisfaction and suffering. And that joy is something far more profound than happiness. The archbishop compares joy to a mother coming through the pain of childbirth and how that pain is transformed into the joy of bringing new life into the world. It is a metaphor with deep resonances in this Advent season as we prepare for the arrival of Christ once more.

May you find a few deep breaths of peace even if you are overly busy. May you find comfort and joy in your faith, even if you are overwhelmed by the news. May you find a refuge and a sanctuary here at Plymouth to shelter you, to inspire you, and give you hope.

O Come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel, who mourns in lonely exile here; until the son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

Amen.

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