

“Comfort My People”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Second Sunday of Advent – December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40: 1-11

There are many ways we make announcements. We send cards in the mail. We send emails to share about important news. We post news on blogs, Facebook, or web sites. We make phone calls to friends or family. Announcements convey news of all kinds of importance.

In our Old Testament passage today, the prophet Isaiah is making an announcement to the people of Israel on behalf of God. He states that “The Lord God comes with might,” and he describes how the Lord will come again: “he will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms” (40:10-11). Earlier in Isaiah, he uses a new name to describe the one who is to come: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9:6). The prophet announces, “In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (40:1). And he calls on Jerusalem to announce the glad tidings of the Lord’s coming, to “say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (40:9). What Isaiah announces is in the present tense, as if to suggest it won’t be long before this one’s arrival.

This passage from Isaiah reflects what he heard from the Lord, and how he as a prophet was to “comfort, o comfort” his people. In essence, it is a birth announcement, although Israel doesn’t know that at the time. They are in exile in Babylon, still, and have felt abandoned by their God. But their suffering is ended, says the Lord. “She has served her term, that her penalty is paid” (40:2). Now the Lord will bring them back among the fold, and will do so in a magnificent way. It is the birth of a new day for the people. It is the birth of a new chance for them and their relationship with their God. It is also the birth of a new life which the Lord will bring into their world. “Here is your God!” the prophet cries out.

I find it important, though, that the first words said to this exiled community are “comfort, o comfort.” The first voice to speak to Israel is one of assurance, reminding them that God has not abandoned them, and will stand with them now until their return to the promised land. For all the chaos these people have been through, you might expect them to feel hopeless and indifferent to any words of encouragement. Yet God is not indifferent, and offers these first words of comfort to a disheveled and tired people.

I can’t tell you how many times in the last month I have heard, “I don’t have any time for myself or my family,” or “I don’t know when I’m going to get everything done.” I can’t tell you how often I see the strain and stress on people’s faces. It makes me deeply concerned when I realize how over-stretched and lost people are today due to family, work, financial, or other stresses which have taken over their lives.

I wonder if what our world needs to hear, and what we need to hear as the Body of Christ, are these words of comfort which Isaiah speaks to his own people in a time of chaos. When the young mother of two is exhausted from all of life’s

demands, and is on the precipice of her breaking point, who will say, "Comfort, O Comfort, o child of God?" When the teenager is struggling to know his place in life, with friends, family, and schoolwork forming an emotional triangle of pressure, who will say, "Comfort, O Comfort, o child of God?" When the homeless man sits in the fast food restaurant, staying warm from the bitter cold outside, how will we say, "Comfort, O Comfort, o child of God?" When we notice that someone has been away from the community of faith for a while, will we step out of our cocoon and say to them "Comfort," or will we expect someone else to do God's work and settle back into our comfort level.

In this season of Advent, the prophet is announcing the coming of God's Son. We are told that he will come in might, he will rule with power, and his reward will be with him. But our Lord is more than a powerful ruler, he is also a gentle shepherd. He will carry all who are suffering, who are lost, who are stressed, and will carry them close to his heart. The one who is coming will make all things right, if only we will let him.

Bill Goettler, co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Haven, Connecticut, writes:

Every valley will be lifted up. There will be equity for the meek, justice for the poor. Then the glory of the lord shall be revealed.

I don't know about you, but I stand back from such fantasy. I slow my pace and let it pass by without catching my eye, because even daring to imagine a new creation where the powerful are brought low and the meek made powerful - a world where everything that we know about the natural order is placed on its head - seems terribly dangerous to me. Daring to hope for such a new creation requires the sort of self-reflection on this creation and on my life that I'm not anxious to endure.

In other words, I want the good news of Christmas without the challenge. I want the birth narrative without the prophet. I want redemption without judgment.

In the popular culture, Christmas arrives just after Halloween. The babe is lying peacefully in a plastic manger, and the songs of angel choirs are well amplified throughout the shopping complexes.

But none of that is our concern, these prophets insist, because God comes. God comes in the cries of the prophets of old and in street corner characters of our day, telling us that the rough places must be made plain, the way must be made clear and God's judgment must be endured. Only then will God's peace and God's justice fill the earth. Only then will the shepherd gather the flock. That will be the way that it's supposed to be (*The Christian Century*, November 29, 2011: 20).

How will we announce Jesus' coming to our world? Will we show mercy, kindness, and comfort to both friend and stranger? Will we be fearful to share the good news we have received, afraid of being rebuked or hurt? How will we announce the coming of Jesus this Advent? May the comfort we receive from God stir in us the passion to announce God's love with all the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.