

Waiting in Faith
Sunday, December 6, 2020
The Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Some years ago, on an Advent Sunday, a child who had been conscripted to serve as an acolyte received his final instructions from the ushers. His mother held her breath as the candle lighter was entrusted into her son's hands. To him it felt as if he were a Jedi knight, and the long candle lighter his light saber. This was just what his mom feared: that some how the entire church would burn down on this the Second Sunday of Advent at the hands of her pint-sized Padawan.

Then, as the congregation began singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," the boy made his entrance...slowly, awkwardly holding the candle lighter, steadily progressing toward the front of the church.

Leaning forward, he lit the two candles – two purple, just as he had been instructed – and let out a huge sigh. His mother, too, relaxed, realizing that the church would still be standing for Christmas. It seemed as though the entire congregation exhaled, even as they continued singing, "Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee o Israel." The little boy beamed, knowing that his Jedi mission had been completed.

Advent almost always feels as though the church holds its breath in anticipation of what is to come, This year, after nine months of isolating ourselves and remaining cooped up in our homes and social bubbles, we may understand that yearning to breathe in new ways.

We have endured—and continue to endure – the struggle imposed by this virus. Not only has it crushed our spirits, decimated our economy, it has dealt cruel blows to people we know and love. It is no joke, and this Advent we long for that deep assurance that the light of God is indeed coming into our world. We long for the promise of God's comfort. More than ever, we resonate with the cry of the Prophet: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Our family spent the last three weeks in waiting...waiting for test results, waiting for quarantine to end...waiting for Carol to return from the hospital. And when she did make it home on Thursday, our dog was among the voices crying out in the wilderness: "She's home! She's home!" This has been the sound of our good tidings.

Today, by the light of these two Advent candles, all of our hearts beat a bit faster. It is as if we can hear the tenor's voice ringing across the sanctuary in the glorious solo from Handel's "Messiah."

*Comfort ye
Comfort ye my people
Comfort ye
Comfort ye my people*

*Saith your God
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem
And cry unto her
That her warfare
Her warfare is accomplished
...her iniquity is pardoned*

These are the holy words we long to hear. Even as we wait for mass vaccinations, these words inject faith into our lives. To paraphrase another Christmas song, we need a little comfort, right this very moment.

But more than offering us a fleecy blanket on a cold night, these words remind us of the promise, in John Holbert's words, that God comes to invite us to become what God has so longed for us to be: children of God. These words introduce us to the second part of the works of Isaiah, words that both challenge and encourage.

The first part of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, are believed to have been written in the 8th Century BC. It is a message of dereliction, judgement, and destruction. But as chapter 40 begins, there is a new voice. There is a decided shift in tone and vocabulary. The one who speaks for God here likely was a prophet of the 6th century, a time following the exile. These words bring comfort to those whose hearts have been crushed, whose lives are as withered as the fading grass.

Comfort is among the images that comes to mind when we think about Christmas. We imagine the holidays as times of great comfort and joy, glad times of reunions and celebrating. Less celebrated, however, are those words of wintry chill that often reflect these darkest nights of the year. While no less familiar, we do our best to avoid the penetrating feelings of defeat and despair that emerge from grief.

But this is the world that Isaiah knows, and if truth be told, it is a world we know quite well. It is a world where God's people have been crushed, a world of exile.

It is not so far-fetched to acknowledge that the church in 2020 has been living in a world which could be characterized as a type of exile. Our pandemic-induced exile has pushed us out of our sanctuaries, exiled from gatherings, and removed us from our places of comfort. And while it

has been a small price to pay in exchange for saving lives, it has been exhausting and at times defeating.

You can hear the sounds of exhaustion and frustration rising from our empty sanctuary. We lean forward in anticipation as the one crying in the wilderness begins to sing. But what is the substance of this comfort, and what does it imagine?

Isaiah declares the promised tenderness of a God who has heard the cries of suffering. This voice declares the mercies of one who has seen the long lines at food banks, and who has heard the silent tears of furloughed employees. This voice offers a glimpse of a future hope that is already beginning to emerge.

This voice begins to imagine what it will be like when the exiles return. The prophet sees Israel returning just as they did when Moses led them home. These words challenge Israel to recall and embrace the promise of the covenant.

They challenge and comfort us as well.

There is hope. There is joy. Things may not be exactly as they were, but the displaced have served their term. Consolation, no matter how imperfect, offers relief. Yahweh's decisive action allows Israel to return to their native land. The pathways which up until now have been blocked and impassible have suddenly been cleared.

Such encouragement goes beyond the superficial elements we often ascribe to comfort.

We have allowed comfort to become a commodity of indulgence. Just ask anyone whose coronavirus quarantine has included binge watching HGTV! Those with privilege can afford the opportunity to buy comfort: better incomes can mean better health insurance, wider seats on airplanes, nicer accommodations, better food. Yet such benefits are not the sort of comfort imagined by Isaiah.

Sometime this week, find a way to watch that contemporary classic Christmas movie "Elf." Buddy the Elf, as played by Will Ferrel, is an oversized man-child who was an orphan raised by Santa's elves at the North Pole. The problem, of course, is that Buddy never quite fits in. He's not nimble enough to make toys, and he's too large to be one of the elves. Buddy yearns for something more than comfort of a home; he longs for the deeper comfort of being part of a family, of fitting in. He heads to New York City in an attempt to find his father—only to realize that he does not really fit in there, as well.

But Buddy does not lose hope. Instead, he lives by the faith that Christmas can create new possibilities. And while this is hardly a religious movie, for my money "Elf" may be one of the finest Christmas movies ever. Buddy reminds us that comfort – true, meaningful, lasting comfort – is not the sensationalized, materialistic comfort we so often hope for at Christmas.

Instead, our comfort arises out of the pain and grief of our exile. Our lives have been disrupted and changed. The pandemic has touched every part of our life, and it is easy to despair and give

up faith. Yet Isaiah's words wake us up to the comfort which only God provides. Isaiah's words become our prayer. And it is this prayer, to paraphrase Jurgen Moltmann, that wakes us up to the world as God sees it. Hope burns within us this second Sunday of Advent. Moltmann says "we hear the songs of praise of the blossoming spring, and chime in with is. We feel the divine love for life which allows pain to us to the quick and kindles joy...real pray to God awakens all our senses and alerts our minds and spirits." (From "Walking With God In A Fragile World," p. 66).

Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God.

Amen.