

"Only Those Who Weep Need Comfort"

By Steve Ramer

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Second Sunday of Advent, FCMF #2

Scripture

Isaiah 40 (Selected verses)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid... A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength... See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him... 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. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? ...Have you not known? Have you not heard? ...It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain... who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing... To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: ...Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 61:1-3

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Sermon

Today begins the Second week of Advent,
a season of the church we set aside for "getting' ready"
a time for "preparing ourselves for the coming of our Lord!"
And boy do we need some help!
ISIS is wreaking havoc, not only in Syria and Iraq,
but now in "more civilized" places like Paris.

Meanwhile the US Air Force bemoans the fact
that they may soon run out of bombs
after dropping so many on ISIS the past few years.

Heavily and far too easily armed individuals,
are also terrorizing our nation, invading health clinics
and service agencies for the mentally handicapped.
In less than a week, while we are still trying to wrap our heads
around the killing of three just down the road in Colorado Springs
fourteen more were shot to death in Southern California.

I must admit it all causes me to just go numb at times,
as the most recent shooting just becomes part of a “new” normal.
I fear the same is happening to our entire country, to the point
that we just start ignoring mass shootings more and more.
How the media reports these shootings can also lead to confusion.

The lead story on the front page of Friday’s Coloradoan begins,
“There have been 29 mass killings, resulting in 155 deaths this year,
22 of which involved shootings.”

But according to the crowd-sourced website, shootingtracker.com
so far in 2015 alone, there have been more than 350 shootings
in the US in which four or more people were wounded?
Is this a deliberate conspiracy to keep this information from me?
Or is it also partly due to the overwhelming numbness of us all?
And I also wonder, “Do I really want to know?”

But wait, that’s not all!

For much of the year we have been watching
the plight of so many refugees pouring out of Syria.
And now they want to come to the US.
Fortunately we have many state governors
who will fight valiantly to keep them out!

But even this good intentioned attention
has slipped suddenly from our sight
as these Syrian refugees are swallowed up by
an unprecedented mass of humanity that is currently on the run.

According, again, to our own little paper, the Ft Collins Coloradoan,
there are now more refugees in the world
than at any other time in history!

“More people from every corner of the globe have been uprooted by war, persecution or natural disasters
than ever before in history. That amounts to 55 million people ‘forcibly displaced’ at the end of 2014,
according to the United Nations Refugee Agency.. that doesn’t count tens of millions more in poverty who
are voluntarily seeking a better life elsewhere.”

And I could go on about climate change, food insecurity,
the increase in homelessness and poverty
and the possibilities of economic collapse
but I'm just don't have the time or the energy.

So do the ancient words of Isaiah have anything for us?
Is it even worth our while to repeat them once again
like we have during Advents over so many centuries?

I guess I have to say, "Yes." After all I'm a pastor
and I suppose most of you come here wanting to hear
something that is hopeful and not just depressing?
And sometimes it is tough and all I have is my faith.
And as the years go by I have come to realize that faith
sometimes is all I have and that faith can be enough.

But faith does not deny the harsh realities that surround us.
Hope in the sure arrival of a loving God
will not always deliver us from pain and sadness!

Comfort cannot be recognized by those who live unaffected
or who have become numb to the tragedies in our world.
Those who find comfort are those who experience pain,
shed tears and who also find themselves,
at times, in the depths of despair.

According to Isaiah, a voice cries out into these times
and places of our loneliness, fear, anxiety and worry -
"Comfort, O comfort!" says our God
Something so necessary, God says it twice.
Maybe we need it twice for emphasis!?

Maybe it is said twice so as to emphasize the fact
that God not intends for us to be truly comforted
but that only the Divine is fully able to completely provide it.
And maybe it is also repeated to remind us,
that it is our common human experience
to really and continually need deep comfort.

In our passage from Isaiah 40,
we can see two very compelling images of the Divine reality
that is coming into our world and to our aid our flagging faith.

One image is that of a "God Almighty" who is all powerful
and all knowing - who created and now controls the universe.
This is the One and only One -
nothing in the universe can be compared to him.

The other image I believe is equally dramatic and true.
This image is of the gentle shepherd who leads and protects,
who will gather us up into her arms, clutching us to her stomach
cuddling and caressing us like a newborn infant.

A shepherd's voice calling to us in the wild
and lonely places of fear, hopelessness and pain.
And Isaiah says that those words that pierce the night
are, "Comfort, O sweet comfort!" squared.

Comfort to the exponential power of two.
Comfort from the one who never gets tired -
the real "energizer bunny" of inexhaustible comfort.
The One and only One who can ultimate heal us.

True healing because only he fully knows us and what we really need.
Full and complete healing because only she
is capable of a true relationship, one that is completely intimate,
physically, emotionally and spiritually,
fully capable of and willing to touch what needs to be touched,
hear what needs to be heard and caress away all that we fear!

It is comfort squared, that is not only proclaimed loudly
from the tallest towers and from the highest heavens,
but it is also whispered gently into our ears.

"Your punishment is over!" Isaiah declares.
Find comfort in this good news.
And oh what a relief that is.
The God who is capable of anything - forgives us.
And this means we can change, we can start over.

God forgets our mistakes and will not hold them against us!
All our pettiness and insecurities have been released to the cosmos,
and like helium filled balloons they have slowly floated out of sight!
We can now forgive each other and ourselves!
Our punishment is over!

Especially that punishment which was likely
merely perceived and mostly self-induced!
The compelling desire of God's love has triumphed!
All who have been held captive to fear and sin have been set free.
It's all about da grace, 'bout da grace, bout da grace! No devil!
We have been set free to live by our faith, loosed and forgiven,
we are now able to anticipate with great Joy
this coming of a God of love, forgiveness and healing.

“Comfort, comfort, my people” love is coming to town.
A Love that can overwhelm not only our despair
but the numbness that makes us not want to care.
Comfort, comfort my people!”

That means you Steve... and Cathy... and...

Into void or the darkness or the loneliness of your wilderness
the Eternal One cries, “Comfort, Comfort!”

“Get comfortable, know that you are wrapped in my embrace
and snuggled up against my chest!”

This is the Eternal One who comes at Christmastime!
With heart and hand rejoice, as you reach out
to find comfort in your times of darkness and despair.

And with heart and hand reach out as well, generously and joyfully
to those whose worlds are literally shaking from the bombs of war.
And with your voice, cry out as well,
for the poor in our own city and nation
who cannot always find food, housing and health care!
And reach out, to those who agonize and cry out against the violence
and injustice in our world and who also feel overwhelmed at times.

Tell them that there is also good news for them!
“Comfort, O comfort!” For you are My People says our God.

Remind them of those ancient words of Isaiah!
“...but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

and

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon EMMANUEL, because the Lord has anointed him; the Lord God has sent
him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... to comfort all who mourn; to provide
for those who mourn in Zion (and Syria and Colorado Springs) — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the
oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

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