

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Today is the second of the four Sundays...in the season known as Advent. We set aside this season as preparation for welcoming Jesus into the world on Christmas Day. Now most years, this is a pretty routine process. We know what to do. We have Advent Calendars that suggest things to do to improve our spiritual and mental health. And at Sunday meals we light the candles in the Advent wreath...one for each of the four Sundays. We know how to do this, right? We know what this is all about. Pray a little more often. Read the Bible a little more often. Catch at least one broadcast a week of the worship service at the National Cathedral. But somewhere in the back of our minds, we know there's something more to Advent than the routines that we've learned. It truly is a time of preparation...but exactly how do we really need to prepare?

The entry of Jesus Christ into the world 2020 years ago was the most magnificent act of love any of us have ever witnessed or experienced or been told about. At the time, it was without fanfare. A very quiet occurrence. But that one event changed the trajectory of the world for all time. Never again would life ever be the same. And yet, it usually doesn't hit us like a ton of bricks even as we are focused on it and we are preparing for it. Most of the time, we aren't even aware of how desperately we need for Jesus to be among us in a tangible way. Most of the time, we're pretty comfortable with our routines around religion; with our Bible studies that rarely rock our socks; or even with our services of worship which are lovely, but don't necessarily move us emotionally or spiritually like they should. All of those things are good, but they don't touch the depths of our souls.

This year things may be different. We are in the middle of a pandemic. None of the rules apply anymore. We are fighting an invisible enemy that could kill us...and we're only vaguely aware of what we need to do to protect ourselves. As we began our scripture readings this morning, the first words we heard from the Old Testament were the words of the prophet Isaiah:

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

That she has received from the Lord's hand
Double for all her sins.

You see, these prophetic words were spoken to the people of Israel almost 600 years *before* Jesus was born. The people of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians who destroyed the Temple and all the buildings and all the houses in Jerusalem. They had forced marched the best and the brightest of the Jewish people into captivity in Babylon. Since all the best and most creative brains among the Jewish people had been exiled, there was little hope among the Jews that they would ever be able restore their land...the Promised Land that God had given them. And they were convinced that this tragedy had befallen them just as the prophets had predicted...because they had sinned against God and turned their backs on God and refused to live up to the covenant they had with God. And yet, if that's true, why is God telling the prophet to "Comfort my people and speak tenderly to Jerusalem." The people of Judah are destitute. They have lost everything...their homes, their place of worship, their jobs, their income, their hopes for the future, their extended family, their friends and their familiar routines. All is lost. They are heartbroken. They are destitute. They are grieving. And in the midst of all that has broken their hearts and their spirits, the Prophet Isaiah tells them to prepare for God to be with them.

We know how they feel.

If we stop and think about it for a minute, we can identify with the Israelites in Babylonian captivity. Most of us still have our homes and we can get around in our automobiles, but life as we once knew it has disappeared. It's been taken away from us. No one has destroyed our church buildings, but we can't go in them. Our normal routines have been turned upside down. We can't go outside our homes or into a store without a mask on. We can't put our arms around someone we love and give and get a hug. We can't sit down to a table with family and friends for a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner without risking our own life or someone else's. It's a cause for great sorrow and frustration. We are grieving what we have lost and we feel bewildered and confused. We, too, can ask ourselves 'Where is God?'

The same God we seek is the same God who spoke to Isaiah and told him to comfort God's people and to speak tenderly to them. The prophet tells us that everything we hold dear in this life withers and dies.

But not our God. The prophet cries to those in exile "Here is your God! See, the Lord comes with might. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

We can see this gentle God snuggling us to His chest. We can see Him comforting us in our sorrow and grief and confusion. Our God has not disappeared. He is among us...tending to us.

We hear the grim statistics every day. The newscasters tell us that this pandemic has gotten so strong and so forceful that 3000 people in our country are dying on a daily basis. That's a 911 catastrophe every single day. We are hurting. We are grieving. We are frightened. We are bewildered. We are anxious. And sometimes we are just plain angry. We think we have no where to turn for safety, but that's not true. We do have some place to turn for safety. And if we had any doubt about it, Jesus came to join us to let us know that God could be among us in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus.

And now we listen to John the Baptist telling those who have flocked to see him all about Jesus. He's quite an attraction at the Jordan River. He must have had enormous charisma because he draws people from Jerusalem and from all over the countryside. They flock to him as if he were a magnet...or a rock star. And yet, he is described as someone quite unusual with his wild honey and locust diet and his camel hair clothing. He's the forerunner to Jesus. He's the advance man for Jesus. He's getting the crowd ready for Jesus. He's churning them up and getting them excited about this Jesus that is coming. That's what the warm-up man is supposed to do...get the people wound up and in an anticipatory mood waiting for the main attraction, which, in this case, is Jesus. All of us need some advance preparation. John is making a straight path in the desert as a highway for our God. He is lifting up every valley and making every mountain and hill low. He is leveling out the uneven ground and making the rough places into a flat plain. And we need to do the same thing. The prophets of old were preparing people to encounter the living God. John is doing the advance work to prepare the people to encounter God in the person of Jesus...the one who will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. John is the forerunner to Jesus...the one who does the preparation for the main attraction.

We know how the Israelites felt in Babylonian captivity. We feel much the same way in the pandemic. When will this end? And why is it happening? And where is God? In Second Peter this morning we heard that one day is like a thousand years to God and a thousand years are like one day. God is not slow to respond to us. God simply has a different way of calculating time than we do. God is not hiding. God has not abandoned us. God does know what's going on. And God still calls on his messengers to comfort us, to remind us of God's presence among us and to reassure us that God is snuggling us close to his chest just as safe as we can be. It's a comforting image. And one that we should cling to with all our might.

These words from Isaiah and from John the Baptist are ecstatic words to us who are fearful and despairing. The God who charges his prophet to "Comfort God's people" is a God who is aware;

a God who is tender and merciful; a God whose heart is longing for its own; and a God who never has and never will abandon his people.

This Advent season as we prepare for the entry of Jesus into the world, let's be still about all that worries and confounds us. Let's focus instead on a God whose love is so boundless that He sent Jesus to walk among us...to show us what love looks like...to teach us about the nature of God and...to reassure us of God's never-ending love for us.

In the midst of all of the confusion and uncertainty and worry that grips us now, let's rest assured that we are being snuggled on the chest of the Almighty One who created us and loves us like no other. In that Almighty One rests all the love and the safety that we will ever need.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.