**“Spiritual Milk”** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, December 5, 2021

**Isaiah 40:1–11**

1Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
2 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.

3 A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 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. 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

6 A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. . . 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem . . . say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” . . . 11 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.

**1 Peter 1:22–2:2**

22Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. 23You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. 24For “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord endures forever.” That word is the good news that was announced to you.

2:1Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile . . . 2Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.

Welcome to the second Sunday of Advent. Hundreds of seasons of Advent have been celebrated in this church. In light of that history, I’m a virtual newcomer here, still learning about the traditions. I seek to continue the message of peace and love that has been preached here.

I need to start with a question. Have you ever noticed stages or distinct phases in your life, where things that are of primary importance in one stage are less important in another stage, or where a new viewpoint comes in that you just didn’t have in the earlier stage? Perhaps you become acutely aware of the necessity of having friendly relations with co-workers, or you become aware of the need to have a deeper and more understanding relationship with your partner. Whole nations can pass through stages, too. I can discern an important new stage in the religion of Israel beginning right here at Isaiah 40, with the viewpoint of the person scholars call Second Isaiah.

First Isaiah and the other earlier prophets had a strong message of justice and judgment. God was always scolding and warning. Moral principles were paramount, and judgment was often threatened. Now, suddenly, Second Isaiah hears God giving a different message. Jerusalem has already “received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:2). What happened? The Judeans had lost their temple and even their limited sovereignty to the Babylonians; they had been taken away into exile in Babylon. With this drastic outward change came a change in the religious message that they heard. Now, suddenly, the message is one of comfort and peace. The glory of the Lord will be revealed (40:5), and God will gather his “lambs in his arms” (40:11).

We sing some of this Isaiah’s words every week when we sing “God will raise you up on eagle’s wings” (40:31). This Isaiah has an extraordinary optimism about the potential spiritual responsiveness of the Gentiles: “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (42:6–7). He simultaneously uplifts the hopes of the Jews for their own vindication and rescue, and promises a new connection to the Gentiles.

One can hardly avoid concluding that God’s message has changed and become far more comforting and uplifting. “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you . . . you are precious in my sight” (43:2, 4).

It was a bold and powerful transformation of message, one that influenced the beliefs of Jews in subsequent centuries. In Jesus’ time, there were some Jewish intellectuals, such as Philo of Alexandria, who were attempting to convince Gentiles that *they* needed to adopt the “philosophy of Moses.” It was really the apostles who set out to reach Gentiles on a broad scale.

Of course, the life and teachings of Jesus are another new stage, or new message. Suddenly, there was much more attention to the individual, much more understanding for those who “are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (Matt 11:28). There was recognition of the spirituality of individuals, such that Jesus could say “you are not far from the kingdom of heaven” (Mark 12:34), or “you have given the right answer” (Luke 10:28). You now can have insight into the peace of God that ruled in Jesus’ inner life. You can share his confidence in the watchcare of the heavenly Father.

After Jesus came the New Testament, which is a reaction to the Jesus event, representing yet another stage. Here you have new reflection on how Jesus’ disciples, people who worship together, should behave, and that’s what we see in Peter’s letter. “Love one another deeply from the heart” (1:22), he says. And then, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk” (2:2). There is a flavor of sincerity and seriousness about being a disciple. A disciple should love deeply, and should seek for spiritual nourishment and peace. Even a powerful teacher and leader like Peter is not ashamed to seek for the simplest truths, which he describes as pure, spiritual milk. He recognizes his own spiritual infancy, and that of everyone else. We need the simplest of spiritual food.

That implies we’re at an early stage in spiritual development. It is humbling to think we are *all* at an early spiritual stage. Granted that we are all novices, some of us will be further along, if we have learned to trust and confide in God for the direction of our lives. Psalmists have expressed trust in God’s direction for their lives, even in difficult circumstances: “I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand” (Ps 31:13–15). True, we humans are like infants in a spiritual sense. But those who have learned to trust in God are those who have drunk the spiritual milk, and have advanced to the stage where they have learned of the comfort of Jesus and the peace of God.

What stage are *we* at? What circumstance in our lives is God addressing, and what value are we needing to internalize? I think graciousness and peace are among the values that need to be emphasized today. Can we be gracious about growth, patiently wishing well to everyone, regardless of what stage they’re at? Most of us already do that with children. We don’t expect a fifth grader to have the understanding and foresight of an eighth grader. We don’t begrudge a first grader his or her interests or skill level. It’s good when we’re gracious toward adults as well. It’s a learned skill. We are all learning in the school of love, and it’s love that gives us comfort and peace.

And whatever stage *you’re* at, be grateful for it. Savor the lessons you are learning every day. Don’t berate yourself over things that you are learning slowly. You *belong* at this stage, now. Trust God to guide you. Long for the spiritual milk, and love one another deeply, from the heart. Everyone else is a growing child, just as you are. That realization makes you tender-hearted and patient. God promotes the values you need right now.

Go forth and embody the love of God, knowing you have the spiritual milk within you. The rivers will not overwhelm you, for God is with you. Be a light to those around you, so that you may grow into salvation.