

Getting comfortable with God

“Comfort, comfort, my people,” God says to the prophet Isaiah.

“Comfort,” is a popular word these days. We talk of “comfort food”—mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and mac n’ cheese. And we surround ourselves with “creature comforts,” the little things that bring us pleasure. In advertising, “comfort” is a popular buzzword, used to sell everything from undershirts and bras to cars and hotels (think “Comfort Inn”). And when you add a word like “luxury,” as in “the ultimate in luxury and comfort,” you have an especially powerful appeal for goods like high-end office chairs and 800-thread count bed sheets. In the sense we use it, comfort connects to all that is warm and pleasant and satisfying. Comfort is putting your feet up after a hard day of work, sipping some wine, and enjoying the cozy fire crackling on the hearth. At least that’s what comfort means to me, sitting next to the wood stove on cold winter nights—so cozy!—so much so that Anna gets on to me for my habit of falling asleep next to it! However you find it, the point is comfort is a soft concept. It is not “working” word.

Which is funny, because that’s not what the word means, not what it meant originally anyway. The word “comfort” comes from two Latin words *cum*, meaning “with” and *fortis*, meaning “strength,” which together means literally “with strength.” To *comfort* someone then has nothing to do with providing “tea and sympathy.” Rather it means to strengthen someone, to support them, invigorate them. It is a word with muscle. The same thing can be said of comfort theologically. In theology, comfort is vigorous. It promises not ease, but a strengthening of heart, an emboldening, an encouraging, especially when have to face up to things we don’t want to face up to, when we are confronted with something hard that we’d rather ignore, especially things about ourselves.

That’s the message of our first reading this morning, from Isaiah chapter 40. They say that the role of the prophet is to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” Well, after 39 chapters of afflicting the comfortable, trying to alert the self-satisfied Israelites to their failure to live faithfully to God, Isaiah finally comes around here to the other half, to comforting the afflicted. And boy did they need it! For between chapter 39 and chapter 40, a lot had happened. As Isaiah had warned, the consequence of their moral and religious failings was being conquered by a foreign power. The Babylonians, fresh off their victory over the Egyptians, came and destroyed the Temple, and carted off the Israelites into exile, where they were held captive for three generations. God’s instructions here to Isaiah to comfort his people and speak tenderly to them, you understand, could not be more welcome.

But even in this comfort, there is no glossing over the cause of Israel’s suffering. The second verse makes it clear that the cause of their suffering had been their own sinfulness. The people Israel had sinned, sinned mightily, and so their exile in Babylon was the consequence, the penalty. Indeed, it was double what they deserved. God’s comfort then is not a reward for good behavior, but relief for those who have already felt the pain and the sting of where sin can lead you in life.

The rest of this passage points to the link between getting serious about the jagged edges of our lives and the coming of true comfort. As verse 3 makes clear, the way of the Lord begins smack in the middle of the desert, in the wilderness. It is in here, we are to understand, in the wilderness, that biblical place of danger and vulnerability, that God begins to construct his highway, makes his way to us. So we understand, if the salvation of God is going to emerge anywhere, it is in the wilderness, in the middle of life's ugliness, when we feel the most bereft of God. It is in such a situation, in the wilderness, apart from all the supports of civilization, that we are forced to wrestle with our very survival, with life and death, sin and grace, with God.

It is no surprise then that according to Mark, the "good news of Jesus Christ" begins in the wilderness, with another prophet, John the Baptist. Now, John is not exactly the kind of guy you'd expect to be the herald of God's mercy. He's dressed in camel's hair with a leather belt. His hair and his beard look as if they have never been cut and he is skinny as a cactus. He's survived, eating nothing but date honey and big fat grasshoppers called locusts. Most off-putting is how he was always going on about sin and pointing out everyone's misdeeds. Not the kind of person you'd want to invite to your Christmas party! Everything we know about John makes him out to be the kind of person we'd go out of our way not to meet. He sounds too much like those street evangelists who wave their Bibles and tell you that you are going straight to hell if you do not repent this minute.

Yet, despite this abrasive exterior, it seems that there was something attractive about John, something magnetic, even charismatic. As shocking as he looked, we're told people flocked to him in droves, from all over from the Judean countryside, even from Jerusalem, all making the trek out to the wilderness to hear him preach. Now Jerusalem was the "big city," where the newly restored Temple was, and where the rabbis were, and where all the accumulated wisdom of the religious establishment was. If someone wanted to hear from God, then why not stay in the city, maybe attend some extra services or make an appointment with one of the chief priests? Anyone who would turn away from all that and set off for the wilderness, the middle of nowhere, we'd have to assume, was looking for something else, something that the Temple could not or would not supply. So, what was he saying that was so attractive? Well, I'll tell you, it wasn't what we think catches peoples' attention.

In our day preachers draw huge crowds by telling them what they want to hear, flattering their egos and mouthing sweet platitudes. There was an interview some time ago with a certain television preacher, who oversaw one of the largest and fastest growing churches in America. He was asked, "What is at the root of your success in attracting people?" He responded, "People are tired of getting beaten up in the name of Jesus. People are tired of being told that they are not right. Jesus loves you just as you are, that's my message." Well, that was not *John's* message. John had a simple, straightforward word for anybody who came out to the wilderness to hear him. His message was: repent! We are *not* alright just the way we are, he told them, we are sinners and need to change, need to turn our lives around. As strange as it seems to us, *that* message attracted large crowds of people who came great distances to be baptized by him for the forgiveness of their sins.

Now, that call to "repent" doesn't do much for most people these days, it doesn't sound much like good news. We don't particularly like it when people point their finger at us, tell us that what we are doing is not good and we need to shape up. That's being "judgmental," which is perhaps *the*

cardinal sin today. But for those who came to hear John, the call to repent was not a mandate to get our act together—*or else!* It was an opportunity of a fresh start, a chance to turn over a new leaf.

You see, for the tax collectors, prostitutes and other unsavory types who flocked to the Jordan to hear John preach, John's call to repent was indeed good news. Such people were social pariahs, ostracized on account of who they were and what they did. They likely felt trapped by their past, by the things they've done, the people they've been. Perhaps you know someone like that. Someone who wants to leave their dead-end life but they feel they can't. Once a sinner always a sinner, they figure. To someone like that, John's call to repent and be cleansed of sins was a door opening, a light dawning, an invitation to a new life. For such as these, John's call to repent wasn't so much "you need to change," but "you *can* change. You can start over."

But that was only half of John's message. As much as people welcomed and respected him, John made no secret of the fact that he was just the preview, the warm-up act, the precursor for something better, someone even more important—the Messiah, the Christ. Now, John wasn't sure exactly who this was, but he knew it wasn't him. "One more powerful than I is coming after me," he said. "I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." I offer you a clean slate, but he'll give you the "Holy Comforter" who will strengthen you in a new way of life.

It is significant that once Jesus did appear on the scene, after John was arrested and executed, the message that Jesus proclaimed was the same as John's: "You *can* change. You can start over, turn your life around. And you'll need to, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" With Jesus, as with John and Isaiah before him, this message is one of great comfort. Not the warm, fuzzy kind of comfort, but the strengthening, bracing, encouraging kind of comfort. For, the promise of change, of forgiveness, of a second chance, gives us strength and encouragement to face up to all the ways that we fall short of what God wants for us. You see, when we are comforted—strengthened—by the promise of forgiveness, we can admit that we are not alright, we do not have it all together, we need help. We need something, someone bigger than us to save us, to put things to rights, to make us good and right and holy. When the threat of punishment is removed, we feel much more free to admit when we've done wrong.

This was, incidentally, the thinking behind what used to be called the "comfortable words" in the older version of our Prayer Book. After confessing their sins, worshippers were invited to "Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him: 'Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' and 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life,' and so on. These "comfortable words" weren't intended to just put us at ease, but to assure us, to embolden us to acknowledge our sins, because we have already been promised God's grace and forgiveness.

You know, lots of people want Christmas to be a time that can make us feel special, loved, embraced. We want sweetness and light, peace and serenity, magic and beauty. I get that, I won't begrudge them. But, despite the trite Hallmark statements of good cheer and happiness, Advent isn't supposed to soothe us. Isaiah and John the Baptist remind us what the real message for the season is: "You've suffered enough. You don't have to suffer anymore. It's time to change, to have

your life turned around. You *can* change. A new day is dawning. God's anointed is coming." That message may not fit that Currier & Ives picture we have in our minds of this season. But Advent is here because our reality is so often so very far away from all that is pretty and peaceful, warm and fuzzy and satisfying. God gives us this season and these words of comfort, because our world is frankly not very comfortable, and we're not very often comfortable in it. These words of Isaiah and of John give us courage to do what we need to prepare ourselves to welcome Christ when he comes. That message may not give us the warm fuzzies, but it is indeed comfortable in all the right ways. Thanks be to God!