

*Longing for Comfort*  
Second Sunday of Advent  
December 7, 2014  
Jill R. Russell

Texts:       Isaiah 40.1-11;  
              Psalm 85.1-2, 8-13;  
              2 Peter 3.8-15a;  
              Mark 1.1-8

Have you ever watched the tiniest of babies screaming their lungs out because they are hungry or cold or wet? Then watch as their body relaxes in the arms of their father or at the breast of their mother? As we go through life we find more sophisticated ways to make our needs known but I've often marveled at the intensity of the innate longing we all have for comfort.

I can remember so well the first time my heart was broken. My first love had come to an end and I felt like my life had as well. I was sobbing in my bedroom when my Dad came in. This was not his typical role in our family but he came and sat next to me and offered his presence and then a few words about a heart ache of his own when he was young. I don't remember what he said but I remember how I felt to receive some assurance that I was not alone and that this was not the end.

I've sat with people over the years as many of you have as well when terror strikes because life has changed on a dime: a betrayal, a diagnosis, an accident - a moment in time when everything stops and you can feel the desperation rising up in some adult version of the screaming baby longing for comfort. And we've struggled to find the words to try and soften the blow and soothe the pain. There are these individual moments that come to mind. We heard one of those last week as a member shared their sacred story and gave voice to their lament for the ache of broken relationship in their life.

And then there are communal moments, like this one from Isaiah today. A whole nation is reeling from the pain of destruction and dislocation, where their dreams of home and stability and prosperity are such a distant memory that despair isn't a rising moment but an underlying reality. Into that pain, a prophet rises up in the spirit of Isaiah and speaks in the voice of God "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

In the face of human desperation and hopelessness the prophet speaks of God's power of reversal to lift up valleys and lay down mountains; to level off the uneven places and to make the rough places plain. These are the opening words of what we have come call Second Isaiah. Chapter 40 begins what scholars believe is a later ministry of a prophet speaking in the tradition of Isaiah. He is speaking now on the other side of all the destruction in Jerusalem that the early chapters anticipated. He is speaking now to a battered and beleaguered people having lived in exile for generations.

As this prophet rises up to speak in the tradition and spirit of Isaiah, the very first word is Comfort. The divine response to human suffering is captured in this one single word: COMFORT. Just as a mother's ears are tuned to hear her baby's cry – just as her body responds spontaneously to give nurture to her child's needs, so is God's Spirit tuned to our spirit. If you have ever wondered how human beings find the strength to overcome unbelievable odds to survive, to sustain hope, or to stand up after being thrown to the ground again and again – it is because of the Spirit of God who surrounds us and enfolds us and speaks comfort to us.

I heard a different cadence to this passage from Isaiah as it echoed through my mind this week. I tried to convey that as I read the passage this morning. I was hearing that description of people as grass that begins in vs. 6 as the voice of defeat. Don't mishear me -- these words are true. Human beings, we are like grass, our constancy is like flowers that fade in a field. That is true from the perspective of our mortality in

that we don't live forever. But it's also true from the perspective of our faithfulness. If you are looking to human beings as the ground and source of your hope or comfort you will be disappointed.

I can remember saying to all of you in my candidating sermon that I know that I will somewhere along the way disappoint you and you will disappoint me. I remember a few of you saying to me later after I was here for a while that you were a little surprised to hear me say that out loud while trying to get the job. It's like the advice I give to new parents – just set aside some money for your children's therapy right now – no matter how hard you try they are going to need it! It's not just honesty that makes it important for us to say these things to each other. It's important to establish from the beginning a mutual understanding for where the real source and ground for our hope and comfort and strength resides.

I was hearing in verse 6 the kind of existential despair that comes when you have misplaced your hope in human beings and have bumped up against the harsh reality of both human frailty and fallibility. Our track record as human being is depressing: people are grass.

But by the end of verse 8, I heard a turn, the turn that prophets often make for us, which is to lift our eyes from the dismal trajectory of our own making to see God and the place where God can lead us. Yes the grass withers and the flower fade but the word of our God will stand forever!

Then the prophet becomes a preacher as he calls them to dwell in a this future they have not yet seen and not yet experienced as if it were here and now: "Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear, say to the cities of Jerusalem, "Here is your God!!" Dwell in that space. Keep your eyes fixed on God and the new day that is dawning and begin to move in that direction.

Here's the thing about prophets, we see it in Isaiah; we cannot escape it when we turn toward John the Baptist. Prophets not only turn our eyes toward God and speak the truth about what is possible when we align ourselves with God's Spirit. They also speak the truth about what is inevitable if we don't. They lay out for us the dismal trajectory of our own making.

I know that isn't exactly the message of comfort you probably signed up for. My goodness it's the holidays, couldn't we lighten the mood a bit? At the end of the day: Christmas is about celebrating the incarnation - the incredible, mind-blowing truth that God has dwelt with us in Jesus Christ. The divine takes up human flesh and joins our life. Not just in this one human life but ongoingly...is with us still. And human life is hard. When Jesus was born he was a baby who screamed his lungs out like the rest of us. Every moment of human suffering that I named, heartbreak, betrayal, and facing one's mortality - every single bit of it, God has joined. Precisely because human life is so hard, God's word of comfort for us is both tender and fierce.

When injustice is the cause of human pain, then comfort can only come through fierce confrontation. That is the face of comfort we see in John the Baptist - calling out those who have become comfortable in their own self-righteousness and have lost all sense of where God is leading us. If this is the direction God is leading - if this is the place where comfort is found and our back is turned away from that place and we are heading in the opposite direction - then the call of the prophet will likely strike our ears as coming out of nowhere and the truth spoken from that place may hit our ears as fiercely confrontational.

Karoline Lewis, professor at Luther seminary, offered this observation regarding the truth of our text and the place of our nation today: " The beginning of the good news happens in the middle of nowhere (Mark 1:3) and not in the center of power....The truth will be known in the outskirts, in the unexpected places, the spaces where boundaries have been crossed and that needed to be torn down long, long ago. It seems

that the truth, if we are willing to listen, will not be shouted from the halls of so-called justice but from a town of 21,111 in Missouri (and I would add from the streets of NY)...The beginning of the good news demands truth-tellers willing to stand from the margins and speak to the center. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ *promises*, for the sake of the world God loves, that God's love *will be told*, truth and all."<sup>1</sup>

It may not always feel comfortable but tending to these voices calling us to repentance is the only way to find the comfort we all long for.

The Word of God's comfort is sometimes fierce and sometimes tender but it always true and it will stand forever.

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Karolin Lewis *Dear Working Preacher*, 2014: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3446>