

**CARRIED IN COMFORT**  
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December 6, 2020  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church  
Second Sunday of Advent

*Based on Isaiah 40:1-2, 9-11; A Prophet Comforts the Afflicted*

To a people living in exile, suffering much, far from home, the Temple of God destroyed, the prophet Isaiah prays for direction.

What shall I say to your beautiful, beloved children? Isaiah wants to know. The ones who used to “have it all” and now have lost it. The ones who used to lord it over others and now find themselves at the mercy of the ones who rule them?

What hope can I offer your people? Isaiah prays. What peace can I promise?

In the dark of the night, The Holy One responds, with these words now inscribed in the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 40, verses 1 and 2, continuing with verses 9 through 11:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.  
Tell the people they have suffered enough;  
twice as much as the suffering they have caused others.*

*Climb the highest mountain in the Judean Hills,  
and preach the good news.  
Raise your voice, loud and clear,  
without fear;  
Say to the cities of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”  
Look! God is coming with strength and power,  
ready to spring into action.  
The mighty will fall,  
and the afflicted will be lifted up.  
God will feed the flock like a shepherd;  
God will gather the lambs in embrace,  
and carry them in at the breast,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Through these words, may we hear a Word of Hope.

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The late great Peter Gomes, known in the field as “one of the great preachers of our generation, and a living symbol of courage and conviction” (Harvard President Drew Faust), used to tell his seminary students that the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted ... and to afflict the comfortable.

This quote did not originate with Gomes. In fact it did not even originate in the world of theology. But the sentiment is true, especially for the prophet Isaiah in our Scripture lesson for the day.

The challenge, however, is to figure out which is which.

Take us, here at SPC, for example. We are still in the middle of an All Church Read on the book by Ijeoma Oluo *So You Want to Talk About Race*. We have been challenged by her and by others – in this congregation of mostly white, mostly middle class American Presbyterians – to confess our white privilege and the structures of white supremacy on which that privilege depends. We have been, and continue to be, *intentionally afflicted* in our comfort through this study.

We are also, by and large, people who benefit from the advancements of industrialization and fossil fuel production. Here in the Eastern Panhandle, we have not yet suffered much from the crisis in our global climate this industrialization has wrought and will continue to wreak.

We *need* to be afflicted in our comfort. *Intentionally*. Over and over again. Otherwise, according to scientists who are studying the Sixth Mass Extinction *currently* occurring on planet Earth, the whole human enterprise is in danger of being lost.

A good prophet, a good preacher – and yours truly is trying to be one – must afflict us in our comfortability. Not just on behalf of those who are currently afflicted, although that is part of it. But even more for the sake of the stability of the entire community over the long haul. Because the entire society is at risk when natural resources are not shared equitably and when internal strife renders society vulnerable to an external threat.

We know that in the first 39 chapters of the book attributed to Isaiah in our Bible. In those earlier chapters, we find out the religious and political and corporate elite, who are bound by covenant promises to live faithfully in the land of promise and plenty, are instead hoarding natural resources and perpetuating internal strife. The good prophet Isaiah calls them, afflicting their unjust comfort, literally declaring a lawsuit in chapter one, on behalf of God against the elite for breaking the covenant forged in the wilderness on the other side of slavery.

It was not ever supposed to be this way with you, the good prophet Isaiah says. And if you don't change your way of life, all will be lost.

And it is.

The final verses of chapter 39 foretell utter societal collapse: Days are coming, Isaiah warns, to the comfortable religious, political, and corporate elite in ancient Israel, Days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried away. Some of your own children shall be carried away. Nothing shall be left, Isaiah warns, not in vengeance but with a broken heart. He has tried so hard to warn the comfortable of the consequences of their way of life. He has failed.

One hundred fifty years pass from the time these verses are uttered to the time of Isaiah 40. The warnings come to pass. The covenant community is destroyed. The Temple is destroyed. Many of them die. Those who survive are forced into bitter exile. The suffering endured in those one hundred fifty years is immense. For everyone. There is no longer a chasm between the afflicted and the comfortable. The people are all just afflicted.

But they have been transformed!

The humiliation they have endured has engendered true humility. In their shared affliction, they remember who they really are and to whom they really belong. Humans, from the humus, formed by the Creator of it all. Through their dark night, the people surrender. They have no other choice. And they tell stories. About their ancestors enslaved in Egypt. And the God who hears the cries of the oppressed.

In their shared affliction, in their common humility, the people agree to change their way of life. The people call out again to the God who hears their cries.

And God responds!

Comfort, o comfort my people, God says this time, through a second prophet Isaiah. Surely, they have suffered enough, God says. Twice as much as the suffering they have caused others.

But don't stop there, God insists. Tell them I have decided they are ready to go home! Tell them we will renew the covenant as they pass through a different kind of desert this time: the one to the east of the land of promise and plenty. Tell them they will become a light to the nations, showing the rest of the world how to live as God's Beloved.

And if they cannot make it on their own, God says to Isaiah, tell them I will carry them through the desert. I will hold them gently, at my breast, God says. Nursing them back to life, if they need it. Tell them I am ready to birth them again into a land of promise and plenty and abundant life for all.

Comfort, o comfort, my people, God says. The afflicted ones, who have suffered so much.

Which leads us to wonder, here at SPC – and around the world – with the resources and the technology to log on to this service of worship on this Second Sunday of Advent: are we among the afflicted? Are we comfortable? Or, perhaps more likely, are we a bit of both?

When our Teach the Preacher community gathered on Zoom this Tuesday, let's just say we received the fortieth chapter of Isaiah with gulps of gratitude. We are drowning in COVID fatigue, and now even some of our members have been infected with the illness, we have spiraled into mental health concerns, we have truly felt the affliction of this pandemic, and we *need* the hopeful reassurance Isaiah 40 has to offer: we *will* get through this! God *is* still with us! Abundant life still is before us!

And it is true!

But my true confession is we did not read Isaiah's first 39 chapters together on Tuesday. And my true confession is we – or at least I – have not yet been fully transformed through this dark night. At least not in the same way the ancient Israelites were transformed by their time in exile. We have not yet – or at least I – fully learned a new way to live. In covenant community that shares earth's resources and comes together in a common vision of justice and peace.

I am not pointing the finger, I promise. When I say "we," believe me, I mean "me."

If I really am going to be a good preacher – and believe me it is easier not to me – I have to confess we are – or at least I am – still among the comfortable. We have more to learn from this present affliction.

In the spiritual literature of the dark night of the soul – and in my own experience of it in other times of my life – the transformation that is offered cannot be complete until we truly surrender to the lesson our ancestors had to learn the hard way in their exile: our way of life was literally killing us. We cannot *ever* go back!

I am so sorry to say it. I really wish I didn't have to. But that is the truth. We cannot ever go back.

We can only go forward. Through the dark night that continues in this Advent. Surrendering to true humility. Humans from the humus. Formed by a Creator who created everyone else, *as well as* creatures who are not

explicitly human. We can only go forward, remembering who we *really* are and to whom we *really* belong, even if it costs us everything we have come to depend upon to keep us in comfort.

We can only go forward through this dark night open to the intentional prophetic affliction it holds. Revisiting the stories of our ancestors, as we are doing together today. Learning again of a God who hears the cries of the oppressed, of the God who stands at the ready to form a new creation, of the God who wants us to take part in that Beloved Community, if we are really willing to change our way of life.

And I promise you, I promise you, if we do move forward , if we surrender ourselves to the holy transformation of this dark night shining, if we truly change our hearts and minds, if we join with God in comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, I promise you we *will* be “Strengthened to the End” by the steadfast never-quitting never-failing always devoted loyal to the end fierce love of our Mama Shepherd God. Who will always, always, always find a way to carry her children home.

Amen.