

Comfort, O Comfort My People: Isaiah 40:1-2

There is nothing Christmassy happening in Ferguson, Missouri this week. Instead there is anger and sadness and frustration and there are riots, and there are the cries of a hurting people who long for justice, for recognition of their pain and suffering. Not much holiday spirit in Ferguson, Missouri. Just the raw, ragged edges of a broken people in a broken world.

Such is the reality of so many places in our world – in places where bombs destroy a family in an instant, in dark rooms where painful secrets are kept, in shabby apartments where children sleep on dirty, urine soaked, bug-infested mattresses on the floor, in places where the mentally ill fight against themselves for just a glimpse of reality, and where the hearts of the poor and the lonely clench and wrench with pain.

Advent is here not because everything is full of the holiday spirit and isn't it exciting that Christmas is coming. Advent is here precisely because everything is not. And still, Christmas is coming.

The reality is that most of the time we live with the uncomfortable tension of recognizing our desperate need for divine intervention in our lives and in the world, and looking with hope and expectation for the time when God will come again to make his home among us.

The people of Israel struggled with this same tension. The first “book” of Isaiah (chs 1-39) outline God’s judgment on the people. They had rebelled against God, they had ignored their neighbours, and they had failed to keep the covenant God had established with them. As a result, they were invaded and conquered by other nations, Jerusalem (the place where Yahweh dwelled) was destroyed, and many of the people were carried off into exile. In exile they experienced the loss of land and homes. Their families were torn apart. They lost their identity as the people of God – God’s chosen and holy people, called and set apart from all the other nations so that through them God’s supreme power and authority would be known to all.

For many, the destruction of the temple and the subsequent exile were proof that Yahweh’s action on behalf of the people was over. They saw the victory of the Babylon as a victory for the Babylonian gods. The old faith of Israel lost its fervor and many turned to the gods who had defeated Yahweh and his people. The picture that is painted in chs 1-39 of Isaiah is of an all-encompassing brokenness in heaven and on earth (Isa 25:21-22). Everything is ruined.

At the same time, the people longed to return to the days when had God protected them. They cried out for God to return, to rise up, to overthrow their enemies, and to re-establish himself as the true God. The “second” book of Isaiah (chs. 40-55) is steeped in this longing. As a community they mourned the destruction of their most holy city, they grieved the loss of their families and their traditions, and they longed for release from Babylon in the same way that they had cried out for liberation from the Egyptians so

many centuries earlier. Their experience was of the absence of God in their midst, and they desperately wanted him to return.

But in the midst of this longing for wholeness, this section of Isaiah is also suffused with praise for God's majesty – praise for the God who would stoop down to enter into the depths of their suffering and rescue them (Isa 40:12-31).

Isaiah 40:1-11 is the prelude to the return from exile. It is the answer of God in response to the cries of the people. God commands that his people be comforted. They have acknowledged their rebellion and the ways that they have failed to keep the covenant, and their time of exile is over. God has heard their cries of repentance and for help, and will come quickly to rescue them and to lead them back to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives.

What does it mean to be comforted? In today's world, we think of comfort a little differently than the ancient Israelites did. We have comfort food and creature comforts – things that make us feel warm and secure and 'comfortable'. But the comfort that Isaiah speaks about here goes much deeper than simply putting our feet up in front of the fire. For Isaiah and God's people, the word comfort carries with it a number of other ideas, including a deeply experienced consolation for those who mourn, and also the notion of repentance. Those who receive comfort aren't those who deserve a reward after a hard day's work, but those who have felt the pain and sting of where sin leads in life. Comforting signals God's intervention to help and restore.

Isaiah proclaims to the people that the time of judgment is past and that God has heard the cries of the people, and he will come quickly to comfort them and to restore them. Under God's comfort, they move from experiencing the consequences of their sin to being restored in the presence of God. And this is based in divine forgiveness – Israel's iniquity is pardoned. Deliverance and forgiveness go hand in hand. God's forgiveness and faithfulness to his covenant brings about their release. God's forgiveness puts everything right. With God's comforting forgiveness, the people can begin to prepare to be led out of the wilderness of exile, back to their own homes and land. Comforting leads to preparing.

Now, I'm sure you can see where this is all going. God's words to the people of Israel, acknowledging that their iniquity has been pardoned and that they will be rescued from their suffering leads directly to the manner of this rescue. The people needed God to stoop down and live with them again. They needed God to come and make his home among them, so that they would again experience the security of his care and protection. God promised to send a shepherd king to gather the flock into his arms (Isaiah 40:11).

Through this Advent season, we move toward that Shepherd. We anticipate his arrival – God himself in the flesh. But let's not get there too quickly. Christmas has no place in this world, no *use* in this world, unless we engage honestly with sin and human weakness. To receive God's comfort, we need to acknowledge what is difficult and ugly. We need to acknowledge that in some ways the historical longing of God's people for rescue and release is very real for us today. If we reflect honestly on the state of the world

and its people, we might find that we join our own voices with those who cry out for release, for peace, and for an end to suffering. We might find that together with our neighbours near and far we cry out for God's deliverance from the darkness and futility of what passes for human existence in many places of the world. And if we are honest with ourselves, we might discover that this Advent season, we desperately need the comfort of God's presence to meet us in the midst of our own longing for wholeness, our own longings to be forgiven for sins that we can't forgive ourselves for, our own longings for consolation in the midst of loss and grief.

Only then will we be able to hear God's answer – "Comfort, O Comfort my people, you are forgiven, some and find rest in the embrace of the Good Shepherd." Only then will that wee God-child matter for the salvation and rescue of the world.

I know it is uncomfortable to sit for a bit with the things that are hard in your own lives. Sometimes Christians want to brush the hard things off saying that they don't really matter because one day Jesus will come back and make everything all right again. But this is precisely the point! The reality of life matters because it is into *this* world that Jesus comes. In fact, it is *because* of the cries of a people that God sends his Messiah. It is in the midst of the darkness that the light shines. It is in the midst of the wilderness that the way is prepared. And it is into *this* world that Jesus will return. God will come, and is coming, into the midst of those jagged and ugly places of Ferguson Missouri, of the Middle East, of the broken homes, of the lonely children, and of all of those who are lost and displaced.

In English, 'comfort' means "with strength". When we are comforted, we are given strength to carry on and persevere. So, this Advent season, take a moment to slow down from the busyness (and the business) of the season, take a break from the never ending pressure to buy, take a deep breath and be honest about the longings in your own life. For what do you need comfort? What do you need rescue from? What is your cry to God? How does your cry echo the cry of the ancient Israelites who felt abandoned by God and desperately longed for his return? How does your cry resonate with the cries of others around the world and here in our own community who long for wholeness and peace and rest from a wearying life?

And know that God comforts his people with the promise to send a saviour who will rescue the world from all its darkness. Know that God's forgiveness is born in the flesh and this is what heals a broken world. And then, with God's patience and strength, wait with eager and hopeful expectation for the Son of God to appear.