

Wilderness Comfort

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**Isaiah 40: 1-9
Wilderness Comfort**

Today in our scripture reading we heard the prophet Isaiah holding together two things that don't normally go together: comfort and wilderness. Comfort is soft and soothing, it is gentle and reassuring, it is calming and restorative. Wilderness is just the opposite: it is harsh and demanding, it is alien and disorienting, it is challenging and depleting. Comfort and wilderness don't normally go together, but today in our reading from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, we heard the prophet holding both together at the same time: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Last week we said the writings of the prophet Isaiah span three different historical periods with three very different contexts. Today's reading from the 40th chapter is the beginning of what is known as second Isaiah. Chapter 39 is the final chapter in First Isaiah and it ends with the Babylonians conquering Jerusalem, the last surviving city of Judah, and taking all of the leading citizens away from their homes to live out their lives in exile in Babylon. After that, forty years went by without a word from God spoken by the prophet. An entire generation died in exile without hearing Isaiah speak another word on God's behalf. The silence of the prophet was interpreted as the absence of God. The Jews of the exile had come to believe that God had forsaken them, that they were being judged for their unfaithfulness, that they had forfeited their status as God's chosen people.

So you can imagine the impact of hearing the prophet speaking again after forty years of silence saying, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." God

was with them again! They were still caught in the wilderness of exile, they were still a long way from home, still living as strangers in a strange land, but God was speaking again. Comfort in the wilderness.

Today, more and more, we are finding ourselves having to hold together these same two disparate things: comfort and wilderness. Much of our lives today are being lived in wilderness places; places we've never been before, places that are strange and unfamiliar to us, places where we don't know the way. We are living in wilderness places where the people around us are using digital devices and technologies that we don't understand and can't use to communicate. We are living in wilderness places where social structures and institutions that once seemed steadfast and secure are now changing, evolving and adapting to new circumstances. We are living in wilderness places as our health status changes and our financial status changes and our employment status changes and our marital status changes and our housing status changes and suddenly nothing seems familiar and we are desperate for a word of comfort.

Comfort usually beckons at the edge of the wilderness. It beckons from the edge that we just left saying, "come back, you don't have to go on, turn around and return, it will be alright, everything can go back to being the way it used to be." And comfort also awaits us on the other side of the wilderness beckoning us forward saying: "keep going, you can do it, its just a little further, you won't regret it, life will be much better once you finally get here." We are accustomed to finding comfort waiting at the edges of the wilderness, but that is not very helpful when we are struggling in the middle.

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. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass." Yesterday when the family and friends of Robert Hamilton

gathered at Farley Estes and Dowdle Funeral Home, we felt the truth of those words. Most of Robert's peers gathered in the room yesterday won't live to see the end of this decade. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.

But the word of God spoken through the prophet was not a word of comfort that awaits us at the edge of the wilderness. Isaiah said God's comfort is available to us right here and right now. The grass withers and the flower fades...but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain...right now...oh herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength...right now. Say to the people...right now...here is your God. 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...not when they turn around and come back to the edge of the wilderness and not when they finally reach the other side... but right here and right now. Comfort in the wilderness.

This past Friday while I was changing in the locker room at the "Y" I overheard a conversation that held comfort and wilderness together. It was a supervisor lamenting over a new sales rep who wasn't doing well. Sales numbers were down and customers were reporting that they did feel confident about this new person's product knowledge. The supervisor was not looking forward to the conversation he was going to have to have with the sales rep when he got in from his latest road trip. He didn't relish the thought of having to share the bad news, the disappointing results, the inadequate job performance. He'd never had that kind of a conversation with this employee before and didn't know how it would go. It was wilderness territory for both of them. But then the supervisor's voice lightened and he said he knew this new sales rep has young children at home and that it is really hard to be on the road all the time and he ended the conversation with a simple but deeply comforting statement. He said, "we'll find our way through this." He didn't know what kind of adjustments needed to be made,

but he was willing to stand close to this new employee and he was confident that they would find their way through this challenge together.

That is the message that the prophet spoke to the Jews in Babylon in our text from Isaiah today. They were in the wilderness of exile, far from their ancestral homes, living as strangers in a strange land. Isaiah couldn't tell them any details about how they were going to make it through the wilderness. He didn't give them a map to follow or landmarks to guide them. He didn't give them advice on how to survive the harsh environment of the desert wilderness. He didn't point out the location of friendly tribes who might aid them along the way. But Isaiah assured his people that God was with them in the wilderness and they would find their way through it together.

That is where comfort and wilderness meet. When we are struggling with strange and unfamiliar circumstances, we don't need advice and we don't need directions. No one else knows the way. Wilderness is uncharted territory. No one knows how to get across to the other side. Comfort doesn't come from knowing the way. Comfort comes through companionship, through knowing that we are not alone as we make our way through the wilderness. Comfort comes from knowing that God is with us in the wilderness and that we will find our way through it together.

We can't avoid wilderness. It is all around us. We are all strangers in a strange land. And we can't stand still in the wilderness. It is a harsh and depleting environment. We will die if we stand still. We have to keep moving forward, even when we don't know the way. In the wilderness, all we can do is take the next best step, and then the next best step, and then the next best step. Sometimes we will get it wrong. Sometimes we'll have to turn around and double back when we head off in the wrong direction. But comfort doesn't wait for us at the edge. Comfort meets us in the

wilderness where God dwells among us and accompanies on the way.

Comfort in the wilderness: “Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low, the uneven places shall become level and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...in the wilderness...and all flesh shall see it together. Amen.

