

Comfort-Able Prophecy

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KOINONIA

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By Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy
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Isaiah 40: 1-11

I want to spend some time this morning talking about prophecy. There are prophetic texts and there are prophetic persons. Prophets have their own literary genre but they also show up as characters throughout the entire bible. So for instance, there's the book of Isaiah, which we are studying during Advent, which is a prophetic text, meaning the entire book is dedicated to this one dude's ideas/words/thoughts...though it wasn't written during his life time nor was it all written by him. I know, confusing, right? So, Isaiah is a prophetic text as are books like Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and others. But then there are prophet persons like Nathan or John the Baptist or Jesus who show up in narrative parts of the bible, they're just characters in the stories. But here's one thing all prophecy has in common: it's all about truth. Truth is at the heart of prophetic texts and prophetic persons. The prophet's main vocation is truth telling. Truth telling when it's time. Truth telling when it's inconvenient. Truth telling when it hurts. Truth telling when it sounds like silk.

Prophets are not people you have over for dinner, unless you've got masochistic tendencies. They are not people you ask a question unless you want a real answer. They are not super friendly. Not liked by everyone. Rarely easy-going. And they are almost always in trouble with someone. They are the ones who are going to say the hard thing out loud that everyone else is thinking in silence. They are the ones everyone in the room looks at when something unjust has happened. I'm talking about Mercutio from Shakespeare and Jimminy Cricket from Disney. I'm talking about John the Baptist in the River Jordan and Rev. Dr. King in

Memphis: both prophets who quoted the text we heard from Isaiah this morning, both prophets who were killed for their truth-telling. I'm talking about modern day people like Ani Difranco, Cornel West, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Tim Wise. Truth tellers. Raw, rugged, don't-care-if-you're-offended, tongue-on-fire types. Any of you know people like this? Prophets: can't live (peacefully) with them, can't live (faithfully) without them.

Isaiah has spent 39 chapters preaching doom and gloom, telling hard truth that no one wants to hear. Prophets always speak to their own communities and Isaiah talks to his people over a LONG period of time, chief among his oh-so-uplifting messages: you're a bunch of unfaithful, idolatrous, forgetful, sell-outs; you're going to get pummeled by your enemies and you deserve it; God can't hear your cries for help, you're beyond repair; don't like how you're living in captivity?—maybe you should have thought about that before you started breaking the commandments. And on and on. It's not nice, not pretty, not politically correct. His is the kind of truth you start looking for when you first walk in the cafeteria so you can sit on the other side of the room.

Until chapter 40...and then his tone changes completely. Listen to the opening line of our scripture from this morning; "Comfort, O Comfort my people. Speak tenderly." It goes on: "Valleys lifted, uneven ground leveled, rough places made smooth, all people seeing together. Do not be afraid. Herald of good tidings." There's more: "God will gather, God will carry, God will gently lead." In Chapter 40 we get a new voice of truth: a kindness, a tenderness, one that brings comfort and peace.

It is the second week of Advent and our spiritual theme is peace. Peace is quite the elusive concept: we use the word a lot, it's popular enough, particularly among spiritualists, but rarely do we mean the same thing, one person to the next, when we use it. For some it's the absence of conflict.

For others it's a deep seated, soulful feeling of tranquility. Some talk about it as if it were impossible, some sort of utopian dream and others claim it's a choice and always available to us in the here and now. I'm not interested in defining the term for us today, but I do think Isaiah invites us into a deeper consideration of how peace is connected to the truth.

Back to the text. The most important details of this passage are the where and when. Israel is still in Babylon, living in exile, living in captivity, living in the losing shadow of imperial violence. Their temple is still destroyed. They are still without a place of their own to worship, sing, pray and read scripture. They are still in hard times.

These may not be conditions you can relate to personally, but we've all known some kind of exile in our lives, ways of being captured and tortured by something. Maybe we know the social exile of living in the closet for way too long. Maybe someone we love isn't speaking to us or we aren't speaking to them. Maybe we are in the throws of addiction ourselves or caught up in a family where drinking and using get us caught up in ways we would never chose. We all know what it's like to live in the shadow of some sort of violence. Whether it's going unseen by a medical system that prioritizes profit over people, or having grown up in a school system that allowed bullying and we were unlucky enough to get targeted, or having family members off in endless cycles of war, or dealing with an illness that takes over our body—violence is a reality most of us confront at some point. We know the feelings of being displaced and isolated: sometimes we can't take the pressures or pains of life and withdraw by our own choices, other times fellow human beings push us out because of their own egos, greed or hatred. Hard times.

When we are in hard times, God's truth is not hard. Let me say that again: when we are in hard times, God's truth is not hard. There is a time and place for hard truth, but it's not

when people are in pain. I regretfully learned that lesson this week. As one of my colleagues graciously reminded me: even if it's right, truth isn't helpful if it comes out wrong. In hard times, God's truth is a truth that brings peace. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly and cry to her that she has served her term.

How many of you have had a person in your life that has rescued you, spiritually speaking, with just the right comforting word? Your heart all jumbled up, your self-esteem in the gutter, your thoughts spiraling out of control, system just a mess...and then a person who holds great power and authority in your world, wraps a blanket of kindness, compassion and mercy around you, lovingly reaches their hand out to you and reminds you, with some kind of life-saving language tailored made just for your ears, tells you that everything is going to be alright. God is still on the throne. You're alright. The world's alright. And you, you in all your doubt, frustration and despair, you believe them? Ever been there? A comforting, peaceful word can place our world back on its axis.

I think we spiritually undervalue words of comfort, words of uplift, words of peace in our culture. Or perhaps we overvalue words of confrontation in this culture. I'm not sure which: seems like a chicken and egg thing. But words of comfort are no less truthful than words of confrontation. In fact, one might argue that confrontation and comfort cannot exist without each other, that they are always sides of the same truth that God requires us to speak in love. They both have life-saving power, life-giving power: and there is nothing like sharing said power when a person is down and out, in need of being lifted up.

On this particular Sunday in Advent, one dedicated to the theme of peace, I want to remind you, as your pastor, of what incredible power you have, as incarnated beings on this planet, what incredible power you have to place the world back on its axis for others, for people around you, for

those who are in pain, those struggling in hard times. We are called to be prophets: that's part of what it means to be Christian. And half of our prophetic calling, the half that rarely gets lifted or praised in this culture, is a calling to bring words of comfort. So take a moment, sit with those gathered here in silence, and call to mind those in your life that might need your voice in their wilderness. Who are the people in your life that need a prophetic comforter? After the silence we will ring a bell, and ask you to find someone in this sanctuary to partner with. Identify with that partner a way that you can bring words of comfort and peace, to someone specific, in the upcoming week. When you're done, as a two-some, come forward and light candles in honor of each other's commitment on the candle of peace that Tricha & Nathan have lit for us. And we will end in song.

