

Sermon preached on December 6, 2020 – Second Sunday of Advent

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St Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Mark 1:1-8

Peace and Comfort

Friends, this is going to be a little rough around the edges, because this sermon was not the sermon I wrote earlier this week. This is the sermon that arrived, pushing its way to the front of the line at lunch today! Safe to say that this sermon appeared unexpectedly, announcing itself to us - ready or not. How very 'Advent' of it!

This is the Sunday we light the second candle of our Advent wreath - the candle for peace. Even though these days peace seems elusive - we pray for, celebrate, and uphold peace. As the old bumper sticker puts it, we "Wage Peace". I like the way that sounds - it's more than wishful thinking - to wage peace is to be an active agent of peace. But given where we are today, our collective experience of 2020 - the idea of Peace is difficult to wrap our heads around. What does Peace look like right now?

Normally, when we think of peace, we think of the absence of war, an end to fighting. For those who are in the armed forces (or who have loved ones who serve), peace equates with safety. For the rest of us, in normal times when we think of peace, we picture a quiet, pastoral scene, or the stillness of a star-filled night sky.

But this year - our ideas of peace are varied: For those feeling isolated, the thought of peace may perpetuate their loneliness. For families living on top of each other, the thought of peace may border on fantasy. For those working constantly - peace might look like a power outage that prevents online work and meetings. For those who are unemployed, peace might be a day without worry. When I consider our collective experience this year, I think Peace is ultimately a release from our fears. Our fear of the unknown, Our fear of being out of control, Our fear of illness, Our fear of economic insecurity, Our fear of our own loneliness and loss, Our fear of losing patience, Our fear of coming up empty, and reaching the end of our capacity to cope. Peace is freedom from all the fears that threaten to overwhelm us.

Peace is not the same thing as prosperity, or independence, or capability. Peace is more than fire insurance from adversity - peace is deeper, peace is more life giving. As we hear in our texts - Peace is knowing that salvation is near. That's the heart of Advent - a faithful knowing that God's salvation is near - and allowing that knowledge to shape our living in the here and now. And this week we are called to wage peace. How? We wage peace: When we face uncertainty with faith in what we do know, can control, and hold tightly. When we hand over to God those things beyond our control. When we do our best to protect ourselves and others from disease. When we are a non-anxious presence in the chaos. When we respond to fear with compassion and patience - being gentle with others, and ourselves. When we become agents of comfort for God's people.

As God calls to Isaiah, God calls us to compassion - to comfort God's people. "Comfort, comfort my people say the Lord," Because I, their God, am unfailingly faithful in my love for them, in my promises to them.

Comfort is more than a superficial pat on the shoulder. The kind of comforting God is calling us to, costs us more than that. In order to comfort we have to be in relationship; in order to comfort we have to get invested. We have to be willing to put ourselves in another's shoes, to imagine what their experience feels like.

Being called to comfort the truly broken hearted and suffering, means we have to face those places of broken heartedness within ourselves. We have to remember stuff we'd rather keep locked away. Those times when we've been on our knees in agony, scraped raw, desolate, desperate, absolutely broken. We have to recall what that feels like. We have to be willing to leave our COVID cocoons - our emotional as well as social distancing.

When God tells Isaiah to make the way smooth and straight – the road is the road home. The road from exile to Jerusalem, the road from absolute devastation to community. The road from grief – to love. God's love.

And if we aren't willing to expose our own broken heart, we can't make the way smooth for others, we can't speak tenderly with any real integrity.

As a country and a world, we're in a profoundly heartbreaking place. I know it's complicated and politicized, but truthfully, we are together in this place of uncertainty, isolation, and fear. And if we are invested in the lives of those around us and beyond – our hearts ache: for those who have died, for those who are ill, for those who are exhausted as they care for others, for those who are on the front lines, for those who are unemployed, for those who are overwhelmed, for so many, many of God's people.

"Comfort, comfort my people say the Lord," even now. We are still called. We, those who know God's love, who trust in God's promises - have to be willing to dig into the brokenhearted places, to run our fingers over the cracks in our hearts. Because we know it's safe to do so – we can live that depth of understanding and empathy out loud. Which makes us uniquely qualified to speak words of tenderness to those who grieve, and are afraid, in this community and beyond.

We are called, chosen, beloved and gifted to 'comfort, comfort God's people,' to speak to them of God's faithfulness and love, God's constancy and compassion.

We are called to speak to those in need of a comforting word. To call out so they can hear us, even from the valley of their grief. To make the way smooth for them, so they can find their way home, to God's love.

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."