

Prepare the Way of the Lord
 December 11, 2017
 Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8
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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

This past week, as we do every year in Advent, Henry and I have been listening to Handel's "Messiah." I have many favorites among the arias and choruses, but it is the opening to the oratorio, "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people" that moves me deeply, drawing me into the hills and valleys with the people of Israel in their journey with their Creator. This call to comfort Israel is the opening of Chapter 40, the first of sixteen chapters called "The Book of the Consolation of Israel." It is God's call to Isaiah to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem. . . that she has served her term. . . that her penalty is paid. . . that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

These words are a long way from the opening of the Book of Isaiah, when God describes Israel as a

"sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,
 offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly,
 who have forsaken the Lord
 who have despised the Holy One of Israel (Is. 1:4)."

Given the rough history of the people of Israel with their Creator—and with their more powerful neighbors—the writer of Isaiah 40 must have been thunder-struck that a voice booming from the heavens expected him to comfort Israel. They have done everything wrong, and yet the heavenly powers have decided that they have paid more than enough for their transgressions.

A voice cries out. . .

“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 laid 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.”

The voice then commands Isaiah to “cry out!” Isaiah, clearly bewildered, asks “What shall I cry?” And the voice tells him:

“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. . .
 Get you up to a high mountain. . . .
 Lift up your voice with strength. . .
 Lift it up, do not fear. . . .
 Say to the cities of Judah,
 ‘Here is your God!’”
 [And this God 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.”

The message is comfort: Isaiah is to tell this to the people of Israel. And we, the children of Israel’s God all these centuries later, are also to speak of God’s love. We are to feed God’s flock and gather the lambs in our arms. We too are to offer comfort. This is, I think, the overarching message of Advent—this season of waiting for the Messiah to be born into the rough shelter his parents found on a cold night.

But two millennia later we are still struggling to change our violent world with the message of God's love. As hard as we try, it seems we search in vain for shelter from the stormy night. We have models to follow: the Old Testament prophets and New Testament followers of Jesus labored mightily to smooth the rough places. In some places and times they succeeded. But this morning, as I reflect on what we hear in the news, I realize what a long journey we have before the world becomes the idyllic place envisioned in Isaiah.

And so, every year, we celebrate Advent, the season of hope. Attendance grows during these weeks before Christmas: we all need hope, comfort, the courage to obey the voice that tells us to "cry out!"

One of my favorite poets is Mary Oliver, who finds in nature some comfort for fellow travelers in the wilderness. Like Isaiah, she is a poet and a prophet. She is not a conventional woman of faith, but she speaks of the human condition, of our hopes and fears as we try to navigate our beautiful—and frightening—planet. I would like to read for you "Wild Geese," which she might well have written for the Israelites stumbling through the desert. It is certainly written for us:

*You do not have to be good,
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 Over the prairies and the deep trees,
 The mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 Are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely*

*The world offers itself to your imagination,
Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
Over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.*

Through the history of men and women there have been many prophets: Isaiah . . . Jesus. . . Mohammed. . . .Desmond Tutu. . . Gandhi. . . Martin Luther King . . . and many whose names we don't know. They have spoken their challenges to the rulers of the world bravely, clearly, sometimes at great cost to themselves. Their words have struck a chord among men and women looking for guidance. They have enabled unity and peace. But they have also inspired warfare when those with much to lose by their message have tried to suppress their followers.

And so we feel downhearted by the state of our planet and its residents. We look for comfort, especially in this season of Advent—a gentle time of the first snows, candles winking in early darkness, and the promise of a child to be born, as he is every year, in the rugged hill country of Palestine.

In the rugged hill country of our world, and of our hearts.