

Peace  
Preached by Rev. Ridgley Joyner  
December 10, 2023  
Isaiah 40:1-11, 27-31

As I was reading commentaries this week to write my sermon, I couldn't help but be grateful every time I looked out the window. The silence of the snow on both Wednesday and Thursday gifted me a cozy space to write my sermon. At first glance the words of hope in our scripture reading are comforting—but the *context* surrounding our scripture reading is anything but.

The world uses the four Sundays leading up to Advent to decorate their homes, have holiday parties, watch lovely movies and eat chocolates out of beloved “Advent” Calendars. In churches we are reading scriptures and lighting candles anticipating the end of times. We live in the “in between” of sacred and secular, and we live in the “in between” of Christ has Risen and Christ has come again. We live between the *already* and the *not yet*.

In this season, we look toward what *will be*—when we anticipate Christ's return—and often that means we are reading texts FAR from cozy. To me, I love it. Advent is an incredibly authentic time for us to examine our lives, our discipleship and recall the mercy and justice of God in all circumstances but especially in the midst of pain and suffering.

For Advent this year, we are diving into the book of Isaiah—a book that lives in the “in between” of oracles of judgement and promises of hope. Isaiah is a prophet that is often quoted in Christmas and Advent scripture readings because it contains some of the most well-known prophecies of a people anticipating deliverance, and in our case—we Christians interpret that deliverance as the birth of Jesus Christ. If you read Isaiah from beginning to end, you may find yourself a little perplexed—first because many of the verbs are switching back and forth between past, present, and future tense. Many scholars believe that this book was piecemealed together—it wasn't written by a single person and definitely not a particular time.

A reminder from Patrick's sermon last week: “There is First Isaiah (chapters 1–39) which take place around the years 742–701 BC). They think that is, for the most part, what the prophet Isaiah wrote. Then there is Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), written somewhere around the year 539 BC, over 150 years later. And Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66) was written some time after 538 BC. So First Isaiah was written before and at the beginning of exile. Second Isaiah was written during and toward the end of exile. And Third Isaiah was written after exile. Three different sections, written by three (or more) different authors, addressing three very different

historical situations, but all in keeping with the spirit of the prophecy of Isaiah himself.”

If you were here last week, you’ll recall that Patrick focused on First Isaiah, chapters 9:2-7 and 11:1-9. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who live in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” The words of Isaiah here are foretelling the Assyrian invasion of Northern Israel that hasn’t even happened yet because of their behavior. “The people have rebelled against God. The people have lived at the expense of their neighbors, putting their own desires above the needs of others. These chapters, mostly from the 8th century, point forward to a time when Jerusalem would be destroyed. In 587 BCE Jerusalem fell to Babylon, and a portion of Jerusalem’s population went into exile.”<sup>1</sup> But in Isaiah’s word of judgement is hope- he also shares what God is going to do to save them. We talked about God’s *providence*- God knowing what God’s people need even before they need it and providing for those needs. As the people of Israel are about to enter into a long painful experience of exile, Isaiah calls them to trust in God’s providence—that there is hope in suffering and that God is going to bring about something good, even if we don’t see any proof of it. “We hope because we trust where we cannot see that God can.”<sup>2</sup> Because of this hope, we can face hard and uncertain times in life.

This week, we are looking at second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, but primarily at the beginning of chapter 40. First Isaiah addresses the events of the latter half of the eighth century like the invasions of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel and later by Assyria. But here in Chapter 40 at the beginning of Second Isaiah we hear a different situation: Jerusalem has experienced destruction, *not* deliverance and at the hands of Babylon, *not* Assyria. And a new power, Persia, under Cyrus, has become the successor to Babylon

“Isaiah 40:1-11 provides a joyful refrain that introduces this unexpected reversal of fortunes. Persia maintained colonial control over the peoples in the ancient Near East, but people were allowed to live in their native lands as long as they remained loyal to the Persian government. Isaiah attributes this foreign policy to the workings of their God, Yahweh, who now chooses to change the status of the displaced Jew.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-5>

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Marshall, “Beginning with Hope” Sermon preached at St. John’s Presbyterian Church December 3, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-6>

*“Comfort O Comfort my People...speak tenderly to Jerusalem...she has served her term, her penalty is paid” vs. 1*

Even in the first couple words of chapter 40 we hear hope abound. What second Isaiah speaks into this context is hope, but in a new way—comfort, pardon, restoration. The oracles of judgment in Isaiah 1-39 reflect a period of destruction, while chapters 40-55 are filled with hope and joy because the Persian King Cyrus allowed the exiles to return home.

The people of Israel had lost their homes, their temple, and some likely even their faith. They were wondering where God was and *if* God was even present. The book of Lamentations accounts some very real painful laments following the invasion and devastation by the Babylonians. And into their suffering, Isaiah speaks hope for what is to come—they will be able to return to their homes.

In today’s reading we see that our God is a God of compassion, one that speaks a word of hope- comfort and restoration. “For the people who have suffered captivity, exile, and dispersion, loss of loved ones, loss of homeland and freedoms, their reversal will be one from anguish to comfort. From fear to hope, sorrow to joy, shame to self-love. From insecurity and uncertainty to the assurance of divine providence and care.”<sup>4</sup>

*See the Lord God comes with might, he will feed his flock like a shepherd, will gather the lambs in his arms vs. 10*

God is powerful and gentle, just and merciful...God is the great comforter, feeding the hungry, gathering in God’s arms the vulnerable, small meek and lost. God will guide them home, God will carry any who need help for the journey”

As we light the candle of peace, we look forward in hope for what will be—trusting that God is a God that comforts the brokenhearted, lifts up every valley and makes low the mountains. The peace that Isaiah speaks of has not happened yet—it will be. And that is the hope for us this day. That as we stand in the midst of suffering and pain, God points us to a hopeful future. Where there was once wilderness will be a highway.

The image of this God is a comforting image for us as well here in the pews on the second Sunday of Advent, one that brings us peace. We may be here desperate to experience these words of comfort—to be at peace with ourselves and our

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-401-11-10>

circumstances, trusting in God's providence. We may be here praying that God would speak them into our lives where we are experiencing deep weariness, suffering and pain. We may be here in the midst of discernment hoping Isaiah's prophecy would give us peace for the journey.

But while we yearn for peace in our individual lives, it is hard for us to light the candle of peace today because we are surrounded by anything but peace. In a world marked by chaos, uncertainty, and strife, the concept of true peace can seem elusive. You see, as cozy as my space was with falling snow and a hot cup of tea, it was hard for me to *write* my sermon this week because it was hard to quiet the noise—the noise that reminds me that the world is anything but at peace.

It is so easy to think of peace as something we yearn for in a wordly realm—peace in the Israel and Palestine, peace in Russia and Ukraine, peace in Sudan. Peace. We pray for peace week after week. But the reality is that the need for peace lies domestically as well.

The silent snow fell Thursday morning on tender hearts after house hearing of a college president who failed to protect the vulnerable. The silent snow fell as the families worried for their loved ones. The silent snow fell Thursday morning as TE cares ran a gift drive for those who don't have the means for gifts this holiday season. The silent snow fell Thursday morning as mothers wondered if their children were safe at school after another shooting. The silent snow fell as people cried out for a ceasefire. The silent snow fell Thursday as Jews wondered if they could decorate their home for Chanukah without fear. The silent snow fell, and it was piercing.

We are so caught up dividing ourselves, being so strong in our opinions and views and values that we are *missing people* we are *missing people* who desperately need comfort. We desperately need to hear the comforting words of Isaiah- of a God who shows up in devastation—in the midst of despair, gathers the vulnerable in his arms. Peace is far from us today, but we light a candle trusting that God's peace will be one day and hoping, praying that God's peace will be made manifest in us this day.

In a world fractured by political, social and cultural divisions, in a world that is far from cozy and idyllic, the call to comfort echoes loudly. In the face of division and indifference we are to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the things that destroy our relationship with one another. In the wilderness of this world, we are called to be people of hope, beacons of God's comfort—preparing a way for God's peace by breaking down the walls we build, extending compassion and cultivating a spirit of unity. We don't

just light a candle anticipating peace—we light a candle praying that God’s peace would ignite our souls this day—to shed light in the darkness of a world that desperately needs it.

Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all the people shall see it together.  
Amen and Amen.