

“A Discomforting Peace”
Advent II, December 4, 2011
Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

In his commentary on Isaiah, Walter Brueggemann emphasizes the long historical gap that exists between the end of chapter 39 and the beginning of chapter 40. Chapter 39 ended with the advance of the superpower Assyria about to overwhelm the northern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom was swallowed up by Assyria never to be heard from again. The southern kingdom, Judah, was spared but if you read the history of the kings of Israel it was a tenuous existence.

The time-gap between the two chapters is about 160 years. In that time Assyria fell and Babylon rose. Judah, unable to withstand the might of Babylon, was over-run in 587 bc. The temple in Jerusalem was leveled, the king was captured and blinded, and the population was carried away into exile. From that experience came the poem of anguish called Lamentations that says:

She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her.

Her downfall was appalling,
with none to comfort her.

Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is no one to comfort her.

They heard how I was groaning,
with no one to comfort me.

No one to comfort. Over and over, Israel longs for comfort, consolation, wholeness, peace. For fifty long years Israel lay in exile:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Into that longing God speaks through Isaiah: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her 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.” Can you imagine the relief a word like that brings?

Think of your own longing. Think of the ways you are cut off, the ways you are living in exile. God’s word for people who long for peace is, “Comfort!” The comfort God brings to Israel is rooted in “good tidings.” Again Brueggemann points out something crucial: he writes,

“...this is the first intentional, self-conscious use of the term gospel in the Old Testament.” So it’s the gospel being proclaimed here. This is not the announcement of a new program for living or of a new regime inaugurated. The people aren’t being told what to do next; they aren’t being told to gather up their belongings and prepare for a journey. They’re told only to look: “See! Here is your God!”

The good tidings, the gospel, is the promise of God’s presence among them. The gospel is Emmanuel; literally, “God with us.”

And just as these words of comfort are spoken to a people desperate for release, John the Baptist emerges from the desert bringing the same gospel. “Repent,” he tells them; turn around, leave your old ways behind. Now you’d think a message like that would be ignored by most folks. You’d think that most people were content enough to mind their own business and not be bothered by some crazed-looking preacher by the river. But they flocked to him: “people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.”

They were hungry. They were just as desperate for peace and for comfort as the ancient Israelites in exile had been. But the call to repentance isn’t the same as the instruction to look. The people of Israel had paid their dues. The people flocking to John had work to do. In his book *Telling the Truth*, Frederick Buechner points out, “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.” When we repent, when we turn around, we aren’t just leaving behind the things that make our lives hard. We also leave behind those things that make our lives easy and good.

John is preaching a discomfiting peace for most of us. What is it that we need to give up if we’re to be able to recognize God’s presence? Living as we do in a world where so few have so much and so many are left without, repentance might mean turning away from lives of ease and letting go of our desire for possessions. He doesn’t go into specifics in Mark’s Gospel, but when John is asked what they should do, he tells the people to share generously what they have; he tells tax collectors to collect justly; he tells soldiers to stop extorting and terrorizing the population and show mercy.

The good news for these pilgrims leads to their discomfort, yet they’re willing to listen and make their way to the water if it means living in the presence of God. Because what they long for can’t be found in their status or their wealth or their possessions or power. What they long for is wholeness, the peace that comes with being near God.

So... the people of Israel are in exile and in need of comfort...the people of Judea and Jerusalem are torn and in need of wholeness...and what about us? What is it that we need as the time of Jesus’ arrival approaches? Some of us may feel like we’re in exile; we may feel as though we’ve been cut off from the things in life that matter most, whether it’s family or health or stability. We may feel like we’re adrift with nothing to moor us and keep us secure. Or we may feel torn. We may be looking around at the poverty we see in the world while clutching tightly to what’s ours, fearful of losing it. So we’re struggling to keep our head above water, pushing away at anyone who might drag us down.

And over all of that, over the struggle, the wandering, the exile, we can hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!" Because God is coming whether we're ready for it or not. God is coming to bring comfort, to bring healing, to bring wholeness, to bring peace. And we have this moment, right now, to smooth the rough places and straighten the valleys of our spirits; we have this moment, right now, to turn away from lives spent in pointless pursuits of status and wealth; we have this moment, right now, to prepare for Emmanuel, to turn and see our God is near.

Don't let this moment get away. Take hold of it. Let God discomfort you. Let God relieve you of being possessed by your possessions. Let God enter your anger, your disappointment and your grief. And let God make you whole again and bring you peace.

Amen