Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1A few weeks ago, much of the world was captivated by the story of a tiny owl named Rockefeller. I think she ended up being nicknamed “Rocky.” She was found by workers in New York City inside what is now the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. It’s estimated that she was trapped in the tree for about 3 days with no food or water. So, when she was rescued and sent to a wildlife center, she was treated to plenty of water and all the mice she could eat. And after a few days there, she was released back into the wild.

With everything that’s going on in our world, it’s no wonder this story of people comforting an animal brought comfort to so many.

Because when we think about what’s going on in our world, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by it and even paralyzed by it. So much so that we try to block it out. And there are times when taking a step back to regroup or recharge is what’s needed.

But the chaos and the fear and the turmoil people are feeling isn’t going away. Not even with the hope of a Covid vaccine in sight. Comfort is needed on a global scale for so many reasons - not the comfort that denies or numbs our pain, but the comfort that acknowledges the truth of what we’re feeling. The comfort God gives to us.

When we hear the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people...” in Isaiah, many of us can’t help but recall that part of Handel’s Messiah. These words are from what’s often called “The Little Book of Comfort,” because in it the prophet speaks kind and consoling words of compassion. It describes the essence of God’s character, and reminds us that God’s power is rooted in comfort, not in violence or destruction.

And this theme of comfort continues in the chapters that follow, all the way through to the end of the book.

The people who first heard these words also heard Isaiah’s prophecies leading up to the exile. Promises of God’s judgment and consequences if they didn’t repent and reform; and at the time these words were written, the people were living out that reality.

They’d been taken away from their homes, their city and their Temple had been destroyed - effectively destroying the center of their identity as God’s people. Their exile was the consequence of their decisions and they knew it.

They had no reason to hope for God’s mercy or comfort for them because they didn’t deserve it. But they also didn’t deserve everything the Babylonians rained down on them in the invasion and conquest. And God knew that.

So, when Isaiah proclaimed God’s comfort to the Israelites it was exactly what they needed to hear. It acknowledged the truth of their situation - that, yeah, they had messed up and they probably would again - but they were still God’s people.

In the midst of their hurt and despair, God’s promise of assurance provided comfort and security when nothing else could have. It didn’t mean that things were going to be better overnight, but it did mean that God was with them in that moment and would be a part of their future.

Too often, when we think of comfort, we think of it in terms of the things we do to keep ourselves from feeling uncomfortable. Things like Netflix binges, eating potato chips or ice cream hand-over-fist, avoiding difficult conversations…that kind of stuff.

But Pastor Brigette Weier reminds us there’s a fine line between comfort and denial.

Nobody likes to be uncomfortable. And we don’t like it when the people around us are uncomfortable. So, we do what we can to maintain everyone’s comfort and to a point, there isn’t anything wrong with that. For example, offering a sweatshirt to someone who is cold or a meal to someone who is hungry.

But for the deep discomforts - like the death of a child or loved one; depression, anxiety, and loneliness; owning up to a mistake you’ve made and, really, any difficult conversation you have to have…? The way to bring comfort to any of those situations is to speak the truth about them, and to simply be with others in their discomfort. To admit that some things just can’t be fixed with a snack or a quick platitude.

True comfort names the truth of what we’ve done and who we are and what the coming birth of Jesus means for us all. Because his birth changed the world forever in ways we couldn’t have imagined, but desperately needed - and still need. Jesus didn’t stay a cute little baby in the manger. He grew up and spoke the truth about the situation in the world.

He got angry. He made people uncomfortable. He confronted the systems that exclude and oppress people. He spoke the truth about God’s presence, and expectations, and grace. And in doing that, he comforted people who’d been pushed to the margins.

He showed us what it looks like to walk with others so that they don’t walk alone. And he knew that all of this would cost him his life. But we can’t have the manger without the cross.

True comfort recognizes that because of Jesus, we respond to the pain in our world instead of denying or ignoring it. And we do it in ways that bring God’s presence and love to those who need it most. Whether it’s working to make sure people have enough to eat, or a roof over their head; or spending time in conversation with someone; or volunteering with a social justice organization; or even sending a Christmas card to someone you haven’t spoken with in a while.

When we respond to the world’s pain, it’s in those moments that we most fully experience God’s comfort in our own lives - not because God withholds it if we do nothing. But because our response opens our hearts to the comfort only God can give.

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2 https://alutheransayswhat.wordpress.com/2020/12/04/little-comfort-sermon-for-advent-2/
I posted a question on our Facebook page last week inviting people to share the places they associate with comfort. The answers are still there, you can see what people shared. But wherever your place is, I invite you to hold the feeling it gives you in your heart - not as a way to deny or block out what’s going on in the world, but to strengthen you as you respond it.

In this season of waiting and preparation for Jesus’ birth, the most important thing we can do is pay attention to the pain that’s in our world. To speak the truth about it.

To embody God’s message in Isaiah - “Go and comfort my people with the message of my steadfast love for them. Tell them they have not been forgotten. They’re still my people and I’m still their God - and we will have a future together.”

True comfort comes from knowing that God knows the deepest discomforts in our hearts and seeks to comfort us. Because God loves us that much. Thanks be to God! Amen.