

What shall we cry. A sermon preached on the 3rd Sunday in Advent [Joy] at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC on December 11, 2016 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: ISAIAH 40:1-11
LUKE 3:1-9

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I bear pain^[a] in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? [Psalm 13:1-2]

In the middle of a dark time,
When nothing around us is clear,
When tiredness and confusion are the norm,
When despair reigns,
How appropriate are such words to cry out.

With a select group of exceptions – two of which we have looked at – Isaiah 9:2-7 and Isaiah 11:1-11,

Lament is the dominant emotion and state of things in Judah.

The people are under military occupation – first by the Assyrians and now the Babylonians.

I wonder what that would really be like

To have individuals dressed in Biblical equivalent of tactical gear, say to you, "I'll just take that or you just do that or I will kill you.

Or, I just may kill you and your family because you are not like me – for I am the conqueror!

Chapter 39 of Isaiah ends on an ominous note – the destruction of Jerusalem is coming!

The religious and cultural lodestar of the people is to be swept off the face of the earth. Lament in words like those of Psalm 13 might be all the people believed they could do!

Though we can pick up our Bibles and continue reading from chapter 39 to chapter 40 in milliseconds,

We need to remember in time there is a long pause between the chapters.

Biblical scholars and archeologists estimate that between chapters 39 and 40, 160 years pass.

During this long pause (700 BCE and 540 BCE) much happens:

The collapse of Assyria

The rise of Babylon as the new superpower,

The death of the good king Josiah and the near anarchy brought about by his royal sons

Most important, however is the massive destruction of the entire Jerusalem establishment – city,

dynasty, temple – and with it the complete social and theological infrastructure.

What remains after this is a city in ruins, plus a scattering of deported Jews – among who is a large group who are marched off to the city of Babylon. Disorientation and displacement.

Then comes the Lord's words through Isaiah

Unexpected words.

Words that recall and reassert the ancient summary of the covenant between God and Israel – **I will be your God and you shall be my people**

I wonder what Israel's first hearers thought when they heard the words we know as Isaiah 40:1-2 For they had assumed God had been defeated by the Babylonian gods!

No, no, no, says God through Isaiah.

**Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.**

**² 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.**

Comfort here does not merely mean solace and a patronizing, 'there, there'

No, here comfort signals a powerful intervention by God which will create new possibilities.

God now means to reverse the fortunes of Israel in a very public and no nonsense display of his power
This display will not be the sort of flexing of military might intimidation

**See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.**

**¹¹ He 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.
(40:10-11)**

MAJESTY and MERCY – warrior and shepherd.
God is strong enough to forgive and set free,
Yet gentle enough to attend to the needs and wants of each of us!

This shall be no quiet and hidden act of God.
Rather, all the people will see and know
God is very much front and centre in this passage
The images from verse 3 onward say ‘I am still very much your God and you are still very much my people’
Imperative and declaratory verbs fill these opening verses of chapter 40.

**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**

**Every mountain shall be made low
 The uneven ground shall become level...
 The glory of the Lord shall be revealed
And all people shall see it together**

Think grand, hopeful, perspective changing and you begin to understand what Isaiah's words meant to his first readers

These are ultimately words of not just hope, but JOY

Not mere happiness, feeling good and unbounded laughter – for such things are fleeting and temporary

Rather, Joy – the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details in our lives

Joy is the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright.

Further, Joy is anchored in the determined choice to praise God in every situation

So, when John the Baptist uses words from Isaiah 40 to describe his own ministry – everyone knows about what he is talking

This is a retelling of Isaiah's prophecies.

Commentators from early on in the church saw these verses of Isaiah 40 as a significant prelude to Jesus' ministry.

As in Isaiah's time, so with Jesus – it will be a time of national forgiveness

The glory of God is now here in the power of Jesus.
Hear St. Paul to the Colossian believers

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in^[a] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in^[b] him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

Okay, fair enough Isaiah's first readers might have said and many of us may say, but what about the Babylonians or the equivalent domineering governmental and military power today? The description of Babylon in Isaiah's time is of a grand, heavily defended and fortified city. It was a city meant to impress people.

This sort of worldly power is not just going to let change detailed here in Isaiah 40 and in the proclamation of John the Baptist just happen!

God through Isaiah has some words of perspective on this too.

**All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the
field.**

**⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon
it;**

surely the people are grass.

**⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand
forever. (Is 40:6b-8)**

History is littered with military powers and institutions,

Big corporations,

Powerful people who thought that somehow they were above God and mortality.

Currently, there is a great deal of angst about President elect Trump

Last week, I read an article that said, it is very important who sits IN the White House and like it or not, President elect Trump will require our prayers.

But the article went on to remind the reader that there is also one who SITS OVER the White

House – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and our Saviour

That is important perspective to keep before us!!
And it holds for every political leadership group, power block or individual in this world – past, recent past, present and future.

The truth that God can and does break into our world at our lowest ebb’;

That he holds the torn pieces of each of our lives in his hands;

That he is here and not silent;

That no power, except his, is permanent

All feed and up build JOY as the Bible defines Joy

We can therefore strive to live joyful lives – lives that never make light of pain or upset

But lives that rest upon the conviction by faith, that *God is ultimately in control of all the details of each of our lives;*

Ultimately everything is going to be alright – someday

JOY – that is the first thing I see in this morning’s picture – Biblical joy



It was the first thing that struck me as I trolled
 through my books of pictures and photographs
 There is radiance
 An inner depth,
 A quiet confidence that resonates JOY
 Yes, they are just children – what can they know
 about Biblical joy?
 I think we often dismiss children's senses and depth
 of understanding far too quickly
 Yes, they are smiling
 They are certainly enjoying each other's company
 Would anyone like to venture a guess where and
 when this photo was taken
 Hairstyles??? Dress styles – fancy or not
 Background?

...

Photo was taken in 1927 by Clifton Adams who was a National Geographic staff photographer –well known and gifted in his portrayal of scenes and people from small villages

Adams was sent to Ireland in 1927 to photograph the effects of the economic depression upon small villages and aggravated in many ways by the long running and often nasty Irish War of Independence and Civil War and the partition of Ireland into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State.

Even after 80 or so years, Ireland was still grappling with the demographic and economic effects of the Great Famine of 1845 and 1852 which caused over a million deaths from starvation and more than a million more to emigrate.

None of that is reflected in the faces and body language of the three girls

Were they oblivious to tough and hard times? –

No – look at the dresses

But the dresses are not the first thing I see – rather – the first thing I see is the radiance on their faces – which I believe comes from among other things, an inner joy – Biblical style!!

So many of us long for such joy in our lives do we not? That assurance that God *is in control of all the details in each of our lives?*

So many of us long for a quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right –do we not?

Then permit me to suggest something that might help when you begin to feel overwhelmed.

Take a deep breath, let it out slowly

Breathe in again – slowly, let it out

Be silent and quiet for a moment

Push the to do list aside for a moment

Then appropriate and rehear Isaiah's words, as God's words for you personally right now!

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words you who face death and dreadful decrease – your own, or the life-threatening illness of a loved one

You who suffer as a result of HIV, AIDS, ALS, MS, Parkinson's, cancer, heart attacks, strokes and tumors.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words you who are undergoing broken or strained relationships in your marriage.

You who as children are living with such strain or brokenness

You who are at your wits end, confused or just plain exhausted and fed up dealing with family crises

You who are caregivers to aging parents, relatives or friends – hear these words from the Lord.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words you who live with under-employment, unemployment, redundancy, or too much work stress.

You who live in or close to poverty, homelessness, or financial loss and bankruptcy

You, who have been persecuted, bullied, robbed and financially abused as a result of the greed of the powerful and influential.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words you who are children, teens and young people, intimidated or rejected by your peers,

Who have no friends, who feel abandoned by their family.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words you who are victims of physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

You need and shall receive God's comfort.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God

Hear these words from the living and loving God you who carry heavy burdens of self-blame, of guilt, of terrible self-image as a result of sin.

Hear these towards as you are pressed down by stress hopelessness, sadness, loneliness, heartache and if you feel it is your entire fault.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God
Because the eternal God continues to come into our lives - especially in those times of despair and disorientation,
God is here – today
Make no mistake about this!
None of us are alone! AMEN