

**2nd Sunday of Advent**  
**December 10, 2017**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

*COMFORT.* We all have those preferred people, places, habits and things we turn to for comfort. For infants and toddlers it's often a favorite toy, stuffed animal, sippy cup, or special blanket. As they get a bit older, it might be a favorite story they want to read over and over again at bedtime, or that one "go-to" game they never tire of playing. As adults we have those few special "comfort" foods, right – Hershey's chocolate, macaroni and cheese, Ben & Jerry's, freshly baked bread, or that Starbucks coffee. Don't you own that favorite pair of jeans and that nearly worn out favorite sweatshirt in which you feel most at home, comfortable? And of course we cherish the select few dear ones, people with whom we most enjoy spending comfortable and companionable time.

Well, there is creature comfort. And then there is "Capital C" comfort. "Capital C" comfort is the touch, smile, kind word, or hug we need when our hearts ache with grief at the loss of a loved one. "Capital C" comfort is that patient, attentive listening presence we long for when we are disappointed, discouraged, anxious, or fearful. We look for "Capital C" comfort in prayers, Scripture, silence, music, Holy Eucharist, and other spiritual practices that help us to notice, share, and bear with God the immense suffering in our world. When we feel powerless and overwhelmed by sadness, anger or brokenness, when "everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*), we yearn for "Capital C" comfort.

I know I'm truly entering into the yearning spirit of Advent each year when I've listened at least once, and usually several times, to those words from Isaiah: "***Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God***", and I sing along with the tenor soloist at the beginning of Handel's "Messiah".

Imagine what it must have been like for the prophet Isaiah to speak these words to the people of Israel. They had lost nearly everything they cherished. Taken over by an invading army and government, they have been exiled, forced to leave their homes and relocate to a foreign land. Their holy place of worship is gone, homes and routines and all those creature comforts gone. "*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem*", literally, "speak to the heart", comes the Lord's word to Isaiah. Tell Jerusalem that she has suffered the consequences of her turning away from God and she has been forgiven. This is God's word to the prophet for the exiled people. King Cyrus is allowing them to return to their homeland, from Babylon, to worship. It's a new day now, a new beginning. God has not abandoned them. The holy One is coming to them. So it's time to get the

ceremonial road ready – smooth out the way for the royal chariot and entourage! Clear out the rocks, fill in the potholes, smooth out the ruts, build up the road to make it even. It is prime time for deconstruction and reconstruction work. Prepare the way of the Lord!

That word of the Lord is timeless, and Isaiah's words come to us in Advent to bring comfort, just as they were intended to comfort, encourage, renew, and sustain our Hebrew forebears in the faith. Do take note that there is also a word of challenge here. God's word does indeed, offer comfort, yes, but it is not meant to make us settle in and remain comfortable. God's word is meant to breathe new life, to transform us and lead us to act differently as God's holy people. The deconstruction and reconstruction work runs right through the wilderness of our hearts – individually and communally.

There are times for all of us when our heart and spirit, our body and soul surely feels like a barren desert – vast and intimidating, wildly barren, dry, lonely. No visible signs of water or any life growing. Part of making the Advent journey is to ask ourselves: "What in me needs to be transformed to help prepare the way for the holy One who is coming? What in me needs leveling, filled in and lifted up, straightened in its crooked places, smoothed out?"

What are the obstacles that need to be leveled, brought low in us? There might be some behavior pattern like: insisting on our own self-reliance; quickness to judge or criticize others; relationships ruled by inflated ego needs; or having unrealistic expectations of ourselves and others. The invitation is to confess, turn those things over to God and be forgiven. Turn a new page. Prepare the way of the Lord!

Where are those uneven ruts in our souls that need filling in, building up? Perhaps we need to take better care of ourselves. (This can be especially true for caregivers). Maybe we are being called and feel drawn to take on a particular form of ministry but we are ignoring that nudge to get involved. Or it could be that our prayer practices are spotty, inconsistent, haphazard. We need the assistance of spiritual direction. Perhaps we need the courage to speak up about some injustice. Even so, come to us and guide us Holy Spirit, and prepare the way of the Lord!

Might there be areas for us that are crooked and need straightening? Maybe we need to seriously reevaluate our priorities. Maybe we need intentionally and realistically to be actively planning now for the future – spiritually, materially, relationally. And maybe we need to ask for help in doing this. Where are the places we need to continue to grow in grace, in knowledge and love of God? How are we using the gifts God has given us?

Are we identifying new gifts we have to offer as we mature and change over time? Holy Wisdom from on high, come and help us prepare the way of the Lord!

Where are the rough edges in us that need smoothing? How are we offering those rough edges to the Spirit for transformation? Things like holding onto bitterness, resentment, false guilt, regret. Perpetual worry. Living to please others and looking for their approval. Struggling to be patient. Holy and mighty One, move in us to prepare the way of the Lord!

The most challenging part of this Advent transformation is that it is not intended to do its work only in us as individuals. It is also meant to change life in the human systems of which we are a part, in our spheres of influence – that is among our families, friends, faith communities. Where we live, learn, play, and engage in business. Among fellow citizens and residents of our nation. Between the nations of the world. We inhabit a world made up of complex and diverse people and deeply interconnected systems. Our differences are real. Yet our differences do not need to divide, separate, and alienate us from one another. The good news of Jesus Christ, about which the gospel of Mark speaks, the good news Jesus came to bring is about repentance, repair and reconciliation, healing and wholeness, strengthening the bridges between us and God, and between all people. This is God's will, God's dream, and this is how life works when God rules. Preparing the way for the holy One to come has communal implications. The good news Jesus embodies is not about our "private shalom". It is not about being content that there is peace between me and God while we neglect how our living affects our neighbors. How the systems in which we participate affect others. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.

Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes this in his collection *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* :

"God travels wonderful ways with human beings, but God does not comply with the views and opinions of people. God does not go the way that people want to prescribe for him; rather, God's way is beyond all comprehension, free and self-determined beyond all proof. Where reason is indignant, where our nature rebels, where our piety anxiously keeps us away: that is precisely where God loves to be. There God confounds the reason of the reasonable; there God aggravates our nature, our piety—that is where God wants to be, and no one can keep God from it. Only the humble believe God and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that God takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. God chooses people as his instruments and performs wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; God loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken."

*[Dietrich Bonhoeffer - God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas]*

The Rev. Mike Kinman, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena, CA, reflects on Bonhoeffer's words:

"Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew how bad things could get. He had looked evil square in the eye – and didn't even live to tell the tale. As a Lutheran pastor during the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, a key founding member of the Confessing Church and eventually executed as an anti-Nazi dissident, Bonhoeffer was not prone to talking about clouds with silver linings.

And yet, he remained convinced to his death that no matter how deep the evil, no matter how profound the pain, no matter how shattered the humanity, God could use it for the good. Such is the infinite power of the infinite love that is God. Nothing is beyond being used for God's good purposes."

*[Mike Kinman, Rector of All Saints Church, Pasadena, CA. From the article in the church's monthly newsmagazine Saints Alive, Dec. 2017].*

So, wrote Bonhoeffer: *"Whatever people may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives."*

***"Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God. . . In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . .The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together"***.

The holy One who comes to us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist is the same God who wastes nothing, who redeems everything. This God of love is the same One who transforms and shepherds us. Feeds, gathers, carries, and leads us.

May the Spirit's active work in us this Advent season open our hearts to deeper trust and courage, deeper faith, hope and love in action for the living of these days. Because *everything* is an opportunity for God's in-breaking grace.

And may our Advent prayer be "God, use me, use us, use even what appears ugly, broken and irredeemable in our world. Together, let us faithfully watch and wait expectantly to see how the holy One will come to meet us in the wilderness, risen forever with healing in his wings.

Amen.