

Sermon: Comfort, Comfort, My People

(Before I share with you today's message, I would like to say this sermon is inspired by the reflection *The Text Behind the Tunes*, by Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, the now retired professor of Hebrew Bible and the Moderator of the 2024 General Assembly, in dialogue with Hymn 113 of the PCC Book of Praise, the hymn we have just sung.)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

We are a society of comfort. Being comfortable and the pursuit of comfort is no stranger to us. Companies innovate and sell to us things that will provide us with 'creature comfort'. We speak of a certain threshold of wealth, and have long being conditioned to pursue what is called "making a comfortable living". Tried-and-true ideas, ways of doing things, and even relationships are described as being "as comfortable as an old shoe". We resist being put in a new situation and being forced to participate in an unfamiliar activity, because it is out of our 'comfort zone'. When someone comes too close physically, or when we narrowly escape a dangerous situation, we say that is 'too close for comfort'. If someone tries to console us without success or not to our liking, we mock it as 'cold comfort'. Even the need to take a washroom break has been euphemistically rephrased as taking a 'comfort break'.

In short, we are a society that values comfort, whether on an individual or collective basis. We need our comforts. We want to be comfortable.

However, in the world of the Scripture, there is a clear distinction between being comfortable and receiving comfort, as the prophet declares in Isaiah 40:1, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

Isaiah 40 was written by someone that biblical scholars call the Second Isaiah, or as I like to call him Isaiah of the exiles. As the Rev. Dr. Dutcher-Walls explains, what the Assyrian armies did not do in 700 BCE, the Babylonian empire accomplished in 587: the destruction of Judah and the overthrow of the king in Jerusalem who had refused to obey the rules that loyal vassals must follow.

From the religious perspective of Jeremiah and other prophets of the era, Jerusalem brought demise on itself when it refused to hear God's warning that their arrogant self-assurance, continued pursuit of injustice, and political scheming would bring destruction. Jerusalem was destroyed, the elites were driven into exile, and the poor left to tend the land for the conquerors.

Fifty years into exile, a prophet of poetic and persuasive power announced that God had heard the cries of the exiles and would indeed deliver them.

*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.*

Whatever sin the previous generations of God's people had committed, whatever judgements that a long line of prophets—from Jeremiah to Ezekiel and the likes—had declared, whatever punishment deserving or undeserving that God had melted out, they all cease, they all come to a end. God is turning the page, and is about to do something new. So we sing in Hymn 113, in the first verse:

*"Comfort, comfort you my people;
tell of peace, thus says our God;
comfort those who sit in darkness,
bowed beneath oppression's load.
Speak you to Jerusalem
of the peace that waits for them;
tell them that their sins I cover,
and their warfare now is over."*

Using a wide range of beautiful imagery and drawing on religious traditions from the people's past, Isaiah of the exile announced good news for the suffering and lost.

*A voice cries out:
"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,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

So we sing in verse 2 of Hymn 133:

“For the herald’s voice is calling,
in the desert far and near,
bidding us to make repentance,
since the kingdom now is here.
Oh that warning cry obey!
Now prepare for God a way;
let the valley rise in the meeting
and the hills bow down in greeting.”

Highway 175 connects Quebec City to the Saguenay region in the north, or what was once called the city of Chicoutimi. Before I started ordained ministry in Montreal in 2007, I had to do, like many others in that province, a French immersion course in the heartland of Quebec. I recalled driving up to that region, by an old two-lane provincial highway through a rugged, hilly and winding terrain. At various stretches on that road, I could see right next to it an immense construction effort underway, building a brand new multi-lane highway, Highway 175. One can literally see the progression of the modern equivalent of valley being lifted up, hill made low, uneven ground became level, and rough places a plain.

A few years after the immersion course, I took my family back to the Saguenay region for a camping trip. We drove on that spanking new and straight highway, and I tell you, it was a smooth joy, vastly reducing the travel time by half.

That is how I picture the vision being projected by the prophet: a literal highway through the wilderness terrain of an inhospitable desert, bypassing the long and winding Fertile Crescent to the north, thus connecting Babylon directly to Jerusalem, in a straight line, so the exiles could return home, with joy and without delay. Through such a glorious return, the glory of the Lord God would be revealed and all flesh shall see it.

Of course we know the intention of the prophet was not literal but metaphorical and spiritual. It is to be a highway through our hearts, so we sing in verse 3 of hymn 113,

“Make you straight what long was crooked;
make the rougher places plain;
let your hearts be true and humble,
as befits God’s holy reign,

for the glory of the Lord,
now over earth is shed abroad,
and all flesh shall see the token,
that God's word is never broken."

The anticipatory nature of the message made his prophecy applicable to the later experiences of God's people. Many passages from this section of Isaiah became part of ongoing expectations through the centuries for deliverance, comfort and healing brought about by the Lord's gracious power.

However, the comfort envisioned by Isaiah of the exile is inherently counter cultural. The restoration promised by God cannot be understood apart from a honest recognition of humanity's sinfulness and fallenness. For those whose pursuit of creature comforts seemingly above all else should take a pause, and be disturbed by God's promise of comfort.

For as the American humorist Finley Peter Dunne who brilliantly coined the phrase "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable", God's promise of comfort is decidedly uncomfortable for some. As mountains will be brought low and valleys raised up, the powerful and prideful will be humbled, and the lowly and vulnerable be lifted up. Such a reversal of power was the inspiration behind Mary's song, her Magnificat which we will discuss in another week.

For now, we should acknowledge such a reversal of worldly order has a profound implication for the church, as heralds of the good news of Jesus Christ. As we gear up for the holiday shopping season, as our neighbours and families get busy buying and exchanging gifts, we are reminded to prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the coming Messiah.

We are reminded by the voice who say "Cry out!", as we reply "What shall we cry?" We cry and proclaim that all flesh is grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. We are reminded that grass withers, flower fades, but the word of our God will stand.

We are reminded most of all of the Living Word of God, that is Christ Jesus becoming flesh, who has already made his dwelling amongst us, in our neighbourhood, in our hearts, and all we can say is: glory!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. **Amen.**