

Hope Is Contagious

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December 3, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

If I were a congregant, I would never listen to a Pollyanna preacher. I wouldn't give my time to a naively, optimistic preacher, not in touch with the truth of the world; not aware of the agony so many are trapped in....Preachers must have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and a novel in your pocket, to help deepen your empathy for the human condition. Preachers must seek whole sight, not just the good *and* not just the bad...

This is the first Sunday of Advent and this morning we light a candle for hope. It's a good time to remember the wise words of Henri Nouwen... "This means honestly facing the despair we are dealing with in the world today. We cannot go around despair to hope. We have to go right through it."

God's first language is silence." said Saint John of the Cross. We must learn to be silent and to rest in God, which is why we often create rest notes in our theater of worship at Mayflower. But in blaring contrast to this notion, our scripture today is anything but silent. A voice cries out, insistent, loud, clear onto the vast desert of emptiness and numbness. "Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people."

God is worried that God's beloved people are lost in mind numbing, heart deadening despair. Worried that they have lived in exile from hope for so long, (they've even lost hope for their children, can you imagine that?), that they've forgotten how to hope and so, they are losing their humanity. Oh will these words fall on deaf ears?! "Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people." In today's poetry of Isaiah, God even enlists a choir of angels to cry out and sing and speak to a people who feel utterly forsaken by God, by life, by the universe. "Cry out to them. Get to a high mountain. Lift up your voice with strength." Proclaim to them now! Enough! Enough sadness! Enough despair! Enough cynicism!

"Comfort" as a single word translation of the Hebrew is not sufficient to convey its rich meaning. This word translated as "comfort" in its original language connotes yes, solace and consolation but it also suggests solidarity action. It points to a powerful intervention that creates new possibilities. The one crying out to the people in the pit of despair does not jump into the pit and just commiserate with them. Rather, she stays on the high ground and reaches her hand out and down into the pit to help them out. Or, as in the words today, they build a

highway... There is a divine commandment to prepare a way out of this despair—to prepare the way of God, of liberation, back home to a good life... not a life free of suffering, that's not possible with these mortal bodies, life is hard, but a good life full of meaning and possibility; a blessed ubuntu existence. Isn't this poetry of Isaiah glorious? This speaking, this crying out to a people lost in the wilderness, exiled from the life God intends.

But there's push back. When God says again: "Cry out... preach to my people", the prophet, despairing of having anything honestly hopeful to say to the people-- is he channeling his people's feelings and lamenting with utter honesty to God?... he says, almost turning away from God, with near bitterness of soul: "what's the use?! The people are grass, we will just wither and die anyway." The prophet is caught up in the hopelessness and despair that plagues his people for over a century in exile... That's a long, long time...

Remember the feeling we had, was it around early May of 2020?, when we could no longer assume Covid isolation would end in a month or two, but to the contrary, we began to wonder if it would ever end, and if this would be how the world ended?... Remember the feeling of hopelessness during the pandemic?... People we have lived through an historic time of exile! Or maybe you have experienced the exile of addiction or wartime or some other time when all your thoughts are filled with doom.... "We're all going to die anyway... What's the use?" Speak it Isaiah! Question God!"

And God responds. Again, firmly, with crystal clear clarity and with the long view. "Yes, the grass withers, the flower fades, **but the word of God will stand forever.** Now, Isaiah, lift up your voice, do not fear, speak to the people, the good news, **Here is your God."**

What might this mean to us? Dare I try to put it into other words? Yes, we must always dare to find language to describe the ways of God. Call it "theological translation"... God is the unending source of life and love, an insistent power ever luring humankind back to goodness. God, the heart of the universe is neither malevolent nor neutral but ultimately benevolent.... **The word of God will stand forever.**

Yes! God cries out to *us*: Comfort Ye. Resist doom thinking. Be aware of what is happening in the world, the devastations, but also attune your ears, open your eyes to the sprouting up of hope happening everywhere. And know that this too is real, as real as it gets.

Thomas Friedman, a most helpful guide to the history and current events of Israel Palestine writes about how, when he was recently there, he looked for seeds of hope. In a recent New York Times editorial "There are more than two sides to this war", he writes:

Over the last half-century, I have seen Palestinians and Israelis do terrible things to one another. But this (recent) episode is surely the worst since the 1947 U.N. partition days.

But I am not one for keeping score. My focus is always on how to get out of this eye for and eye, tooth for a tooth horror show before everyone is left blind and toothless. To that end I devoted a lot of time on my trip to Israel and the West Bank this month observing and probing the actual day-to day interactions among Israeli Arabs and Jews. These are always complex, sometimes surprising, occasionally depressing, and more often than you might expect, uplifting, experiences. Because they reveal enough seeds of coexistence scattered around that one can still dream the dream, that we might one day have a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians living between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan river.

Friedman continues... I ask you to spare a few moments with me to reflect on some of these people. They will give you more faith in humanity than the headlines around this story would ever suggest. On this trip, I let out my inner Mondale (remember another Minnesotan and a child of the church) to chase some rays of hope shooting through the darkness.

Then Friedman tells several stories, (you should read it) like about how an Israeli Bedouin Palestinian Muslim Arabs, who was hired to drive a group of Jewish kids to the outdoor trance festival on Oct 6 went back to get them, at great risk to himself, after he got an urgent call for help. Because he was Bedouin, he had intimate knowledge of the terrain. He Drove off the roads, through the fields, cramming some 30 people into his vehicle and other vehicles followed him to safety as well.

Friedman writes: "Stories like these show that Oct 7 was not a war between Jews and Arabs but between darkness and light".

Reading more, avidly consuming any news about this part of the world, scrolling on my computer, not doom scrolling, nor Pollyanna scrolling, but truth and hope scrolling, I came across this news of a Thanksgiving happening in Minneapolis. (You can find this story in your Mayflower weekly eblast under homework for today's sermon.) Did you do your homework? 😊 Maybe you were even there in person... At Plymouth Congregational church, for the interfaith Thanksgiving service, with Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and indigenous religious leaders, and a full sanctuary of people, giving thanks and resisting separation and prejudice and planting seeds of hope... Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman of Temple Israel said " "We need this ritual this year," she said: "We are cousins, we are brothers and sisters, we are siblings. May we learn how to turn towards each other to do the work necessary to make our community a model for hope,".

We can trust that these seeds of hope planted that Thanksgiving Day will grow, if people tend to them. This is not Pollyanna. That event really happened. When you get people together in a holy place, with other people who are not burying their heads in the sand nor seeing the world through rose colored glasses, but who are open to the stirring of God,.... people who know the history of brutality and despair but also know that the future is not

predestined or pre determined, that the unexpected does sprout up in often surprising ways... a people who gives themselves to the work of love, not just for their family or their own people but for all people... well!, that's when hope can grow and spread. Hope is contagious. We know this. We've experienced it. Whoever would have guessed that what happened at 38th and Chicago, as tragic as it was and continues to be, would be the seed that started a worldwide reckoning with racism and colonialism. This preacher will never stop speaking of this event that set off unheard of possibilities in human history.

Our scripture today from the book of Isaiah is full of imperatives—Comfort, Say, See, Speak, Prepare, Get up, Cry out.... “Comfort my beloved fragile, despairing people”, God says to the prophet.

But I wonder whether it is less about what the prophet cries out... less about what the preacher preaches... and more about the song that rises up from the people. It's about what we sing together, that binds us together, and shapes our thoughts and actions. Put away that device that steals your attention and instead be with one another and do this strange thing that human communities have been doing since the beginning of human communities, coming together, and lifting their voice in song, and creating hope. Hope is contagious. The final imperative this morning is not from our scripture. It's from our song. And it's emphatic. And it's not passive. You can choose. Choose to despair. Choose to ignore the world and live in your own la la land. Or you can **Choose to hope**.

Sources

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