

A Homily preached by
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“comforting the afflicted; afflicting the comfortable”

Second Sunday in Advent – December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

One evening a disheveled man got on the bus. He was talking – lamenting, maybe murmuring – to himself. There was a woman on the bus who took offense at his appearance and his conversation with himself, and she asked the driver to put him off the bus. It was really cold that day, and the man just wanted a warm place to sit. The woman was obviously quite uncomfortable. Perhaps she had had a really hard day at work and was irritated even before she saw and heard and smelled the man who got on the bus. Perhaps she was afraid. Her protests gained the attention of the other passengers who then started to complain about their discomfort – their dis-ease – with the man. The driver started to stop the bus and put the man out in the cold when one of my parishioners at my last church moved over to the seat next to the offensive man and told the bus driver that he was talking to her. She started a conversation with him, and then she (and the other passengers) got to hear his story. He was homeless and lived in some bushes downtown; he had had great misfortunes in his life recently. As more heard his story they changed their minds about having him put off the bus. My former parishioner got out of her comfort zone to be Christ to this man – and she was able to see Christ in him. I want to invite us all to get out of our comfort zones this Advent. The man on the bus could just as well have had dead locusts stuck in his beard and sticky honey spilled on his hair shirt.

Squint up your eyes and imagine with me John the Baptist who proclaimed the coming of the Lord – he had to have made the people of the 1st century uncomfortable – crying out to prepare the way of the Lord – yelling about the need for repentance. We might think that John would have frightened the people away with his prophetic messages. But, no, many came out to him and confessed their sins and were baptized.

The prophets of old spoke God’s word and some listened and heeded God’s voice spoken through them. Isaiah’s prophetic message was both new and old – telling what

was both promised and expected. Prophecy has not died away, my friends, but rather it is being transformed generation after generation. The message of God's word is being transformed, so that even today it is alive and relevant to us. God's nature, however, is unchangeable; it is always the same. God's word does not pass away. God's word has stood firm since the beginning of time. We still hear and try to understand God's words, those spoken by his own son Jesus Christ for whom we wait again this Advent. But we also listen to God's prophets from a much earlier time to try to understand our purpose in the world – to discern our callings to live into who we are meant to be. Isaiah spoke these words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Comfort the people of Jerusalem who were living in exile under Babylonian's tyranny in a land not their own. Comfort the people of Israe and of Gaza. Comfort them because of their sufferings. Yes, Isaiah's prophecy speaks to us today in the 21wst century. We learn from Isaiah as though it were fresh and new. Because it is relevant and revelatory today, just like Advent – the message comes to us new again and again.

So when we hear “Comfort my people,” what do we hear this Advent? I have a priest friend who has always had a bumper sticker on her car that reads “I am called to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Now I do not subscribe to most bumper sticker wisdom. For me this modern proverb – calling us to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable – depends on where people are in their life journey, for at some point we all have been afflicted or suffering, we have at times been very comfortable. What causes us discomfort? For many of us, change and loss of control are main causes of discomfort. During times of illness and times of recovery we do not seem to be spiritually troubled by new ways of living. But then we heal, we ease back into the oh-so-comfortable ways of doing things – wanting to live in the past – doing things like they always have been done. I wonder, do we need to embrace a bit of discomfort and adapt some of our customs. Not surprisingly, we don't seem to be uncomfortable when we come out of our wilderness and begin to refocus our efforts on others in the world – those who are suffering – on those who live in the woods or in tents – on others who do not know the great comforter.

Recently I have had to accept that I am not in charge. Really, we are not in charge – none of us – because God is in charge! And since God is in charge why are we so concerned about maintaining and living only within our own comfort zones? And I have been reflecting on God’s comfort zone lately. Does God even have comfort zones like we do? If God were uncomfortable with anything, I think it must have been the incarnation. Imagine what it must have been like for God to submit to the limitations of a baby and then the limitations of a human man? For God – who created and sustains everything – how comfortable or uncomfortable must it have been to become like us? What was it like for God to see his only son fully human? And what must it be like for God to see Christ in us human beings? And are others drawn to Christ by what they see in us? My friends, we are Christ’s presence now. We demonstrate what being a Christian is all about. What might a newcomer see in us? Would a visitor see Christ in us as we worship together?

Are we really being called to get out of our comfort zone to get the message of the Gospel across to non-believers – or to believers who are less fortunate than we – or to new believers – or to those who have lost their faith – or even to one another? I believe that we are called to follow God’s example of the incarnation – to be Christ to others. Do we offer the true presence of Christ to others – to one another – to those in our community – to all God’s people – even to those who make us uncomfortable?

This Advent as Christmas approaches, I ask that we prepare for Christ to enter into us in a new way by examining our own comfort zones. I ask us to pray about how we might comfort the afflicted, yes, but also how we might embrace the inevitable change inherent in being the comfortable who spread the good news of Christ to one another and to those beyond our church. We are blessed to have the opportunity to share Christ – and what we have – with others. We need to ask God for the boldness it takes to get out of our comfort zones and take on our callings as Christians – as Episcopalians – to be Christ to the world and to one another this Advent and Christmas – and throughout the whole year.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.