

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

### **Where Peace Resides**

I asked permission to share these stories, permission of my friend and colleague Jean Lenk – and she said yes.

We were driving home from something this week, I was dropping Jean off, when she started reflecting about people asking pastors for prayers.

"When I was in Topsfield, I was called to a farm," she said. "These people had a cow, it was in labor, and things didn't look so good. I went to the farm, and I prayed with them, for the cow. But the cow and the calf didn't make it – they both died."

"Then another time," Jean said, "This woman was moving out of a house she'd lived in a long time. She wanted me to come over, to bless the house, you know, because she wanted the place to be a good and happy place for the next family that would live in it. So I did that, I prayed a blessing for the house. Don't you know, Jean says, I got word that the couple that moved in soon divorced!"

You may think us odd, but Jean and I got a big laugh out of that. "So much for the efficacy of the pastor's prayers" I said. "I know" she said, "kinda made me wonder" she said. "Remind me not to ask you to pray for me" I said. Which made us guffaw all the more.

I share that because it helps me get to the problem, the theological problem I see not so much in today's scripture as in many of our minds -- namely the idea that God will come and do what God is suppose to do at our bidding. God will come and right the wrong. God will take my problem, or my family member's problem, or our church's problem, take that away and leave me, leave you, leave us in a better place than we currently are. God is the great fixer in the sky in this scenario, and our job is to pray hard enough to get God to act for us. It's understandable how people get this idea...it's been in vogue for a long time.

At first it seems like this notion of the Rescue God is what we are looking at in today's scripture lesson. A voice speaks Comfort, Comfort my people. Isaiah is to make comfort known -- the comfort that God is coming, to turn this miserable time of exile and servitude -- this interminable now-- into a new and brighter day. The passage is about what is about to happen, spoken as if turn around time is imminent. A voice cries out "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." God is coming, like a king, a king who will bear gifts for the people -- gifts of redemption, a return to dignity, and a pathway back home.

Only the gift God offers is odd, really -- odd comfort. Here are these people, wanting help, desperate for change, And God says Cry out! What shall I cry? The prophet asks. What shall I preach? And here is God's strange comfort: Tell the people they are grass. All flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God lives forever.

In bible study this week, that felt like the moment: when we let that odd gift, that truth, sink in around the circle. Someone who has been struggling with illness for quite a while shared how she once knew a pastor that ended every sermon with those lines. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God lives forever. Then, this same person shared how since becoming sick with cancer she is in greater touch herself with the truth of this -- the truth of our own mortality, her own mortality -- and as such, she finds herself telling people she loves that she loves them -- all the time. Heard one way, all flesh is grass sounds like bad news: we are all sooner or later going to die. But heard another way it is liberating. Why wait to live, to speak love, to be the person you want to be? We only have the present moment. In fact, even that is in God's hands.

I wonder: what perspective to your life, and to these times we are living in might it bring you to say, put a sign on your bathroom mirror that says "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of the Lord lives forever." Would it help you take hold of the life that is really life, and let the rest be gone? Would it help you be more humble, or give up trying -- trying always -- to be in control? Would it help you let go of your own agenda, and see God's agenda for us and for our world, see that more clearly? How might these words want to have their way with *you* today?

Today we lit the candle for peace. When I think about times in my life when “peace” was not a word that described my interior, the reason seemed to have everything to do with where my confidence lay. I confess there have been times in my life that my peace for the future seemed to depend on my ability to get a next call in ministry, rather than in the One who promised to never leave me alone. There have been times in my life when my relationships with others seemed to be grounded in my ability to make myself known or understood, rather than grounded in the One who knew I needed companionship, and who would teach me how to be a better companion myself.

And now, today, there are times when my peace for the future of my country is in my mind tied to people’s (other people’s) ability to change, rather than to my understanding and faith and confidence in the One who calls himself the Prince of Peace, who will do the work he was sent to earth to do.

Do you see what I am saying?

We live all of us with this desire, this impulse to be in the driver’s seat, to see ourselves as the beginning and end of things. But as someone has said, “True peace comes when we remember we’re not in control and never will be.” (Elizabeth Hagan: Seeing a Different World, Advent devotional, Sunday, December 10) So one of the gifts God comes bearing, when God comes, is this invitation to surrender – to stop trying to be ourselves the source of our hope and salvation— and to make that Source rightly God.

Which leads me back to the dead cow and the house blessing gone awry. We all need to get off the idea that our prayers are going to determine what is going to happen including the idea that we can affect on what time table God will act. To think that is hubris, and makes God someone we can cajole or manipulate for our own desires – which is hardly the foundation of a good and loving relationship. In fact, as I know I am still learning, we do best in prayer when we try to still all the voices—our own clamoring voice included -- and simply listen.

Does this sound like I am saying prayers have no effect? That would be an odd thing for a pastor to say. What I am saying is that there is a better way to pray, one that is more like the companionship we know with good friends. Such prayer isn’t all beseeching. It isn’t making a list to present to God. It is putting ourselves in the presence of God. It is listening as much as it is speaking.

So, what if Jean had been asked to just be with the farmers family as they stood in solidarity with their laboring cow? What if the woman moving from the house had asked Jean to pray for *her*, not the house that was going to now be someone else’s, as if Jean’s prayers could preordain nothing but goodness shall reside here, but what if the praying had been for the woman moving out of that house– a woman facing transition, feeling grief and uncertainty about her next steps. Wouldn’t that be more honest, more authentic prayer?

So, I would say that prayers have a deep effect, because they help us be honest, and because they remind us of how connected we are to one another. "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other" Mother Teresa said. Prayer reminds us. It is not unlike friendship. The best friends offer real comfort that is not rescue, but presence.

Finally, this sermon should end where our scripture ends. with a God who is coming in power – but not the strength of a bloody avenger, a violent brute, or a demanding judge. Here God's strength appears in gentleness, in the lovely image of a shepherd, a tender, caring presence, who gathers the wounded, scattered flock leading them to safety, leading them home.

When we come to be with one another, and when we try and make our way into the future, when we try to be peacemakers and peace givers in this world, may this God, this mighty gentle God, be our inspiration. And when we come to this table today, may we hear this God inviting us.

Amen.