

## Year B Advent 2, December 6, 2020

✚ *“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”* The Jews have been exiled from their land for a couple of generations. This particular group, a rather large group, have been very much second-class citizens in Babylon. This captivity has been a long, dark time for them – cut off from their land, their places of worship, their temple and their people. They are losing their way, even feeling that God has abandoned them.

✚ Last week, in my sermon I talked about a vague light at the end of a tunnel in the midst of apocalyptic language speaking of end times. Last week’s readings were very dark: Isaiah crying out for God to come and save us and Jesus telling us to look for signs that the end is near and to be alert, be awake so as not to miss the distant hope that the Lord is coming on clouds with the powers of heaven. I encouraged you in our own dark times not to skip the hard stuff and go right to Christmas, but to sit with these readings all week and ask ourselves at this time: can I hear that faint promise? Can I see the light (maybe just a pin prick) at the end of the tunnel? Can I trust that that light is the promise of divine salvation?

✚ I hope you were able dwell in the dark and muse over all that we're going through right now with the knowledge that God is here and there is hope and a promise that God is also in the future. Well, Christmas is still a few weeks away and we still have a bit of a journey on our route to Bethlehem. It is still night. We continue to suffer the COVID pandemic. I despair at the lack of progress and in fact backtracking that we are making on the environmental front. Racism, poverty, war – its all still with us, but today we find ourselves a little further down that dark tunnel and the light ahead of us is getting a bit brighter and a bit clearer as we continue to move forward in faith that even a train coming at us will not prevent that light from saving us.

✚ Today, we hear Isaiah speak God's word to his suffering people in Babylon. Last week they were crying in despair, begging God for a way out. Well today the message is that God has heard those cries of despair. How could God not have been listening to the cries of the beloved people? God says: "Comfort my people. Their suffering is coming to an end. I have a plan." In poetic language, this plan and in fact promise is to make a direct highway, flattening out the hills and valleys all the way between Babylon and Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is to prepare itself for this glorious return – proclaiming it from the mountain tops so all the cities of Judah will know that God is a God of salvation who does not abandon, but stubbornly loves this precious people. These words bring a new hope, a sense that God is

doing something, and that brings comfort to a suffering people.

✚ Skip ahead a few hundred years, and the Jews are now under Roman occupation. Poverty is endemic, their temple is desecrated with images of foreign gods (Caesar being one of them), their priestly and their ruling class have been co-opted by the Roman administration and they have been waiting, hoping that God would send a Messiah: a sign of God's love for them and a return to freedom from oppression. That has been their vague hope – a distant pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel. Their holy scriptures speak of this hope, but it maybe feels like just a dream.

✚ Well, now something is happening. Something is beginning. God is acting. We hear the beginning of the good news that is now happening. This wild man, probably a Nazarite (someone dedicated to serve God as a holy man from birth). John is out there in the wilderness with a very specific task. He is the beginning piece of God's plan. He is out there to proclaim the one who is on the way; the one who will save us, and he is helping people prepare their hearts – open their hearts, so they are ready when he gets here. This is what his baptism is all about, a baptism of repentance – of turning one's life around with a heart able to see what God is up to.

✚ Jesus is coming, and if your heart is open and you have eyes to see and ears to hear, salvation

is just around the corner. The baptism John offers is a temporary fix that prepares the way, but Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit to fill and transform our lives eternally. And he's coming now – not in some distant, mysterious future, but now – coming into our lives if we're alert, awake and prepared to see.

✚ John's message must have been quite striking, for he gathered a large following that seems to have threatened the Roman occupiers and their Jewish puppet king. He basically asked people to turn their hearts and their loyalty to God, who was sending the one who would set them free – who would save them. Treasonous words to the Romans.

✚ So, we're still not there yet. COVID is still with us, but there's a vaccine coming imminently. The good news John preaches isn't just for 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian Jews, though. It is also for us. There is so much darkness around us that perhaps the light ahead is very dim or maybe we can't even see it. What John urges us to do is prepare ourselves by seeing with new eyes and hearing with new ears. For when we do, that light is so clearly just in front of us. It is not lighting up our faces yet, but Christmas is coming. The Messiah, the salvation of the world is at hand. Jesus isn't a vaccine, but he is coming!

✚ This second Sunday of Advent is sometimes considered the Sunday of peace. Last week, the Sunday of hope, offered us that dim light in the

distance – definitely there, but distant. Today that hope is almost within our grasp and it brings us peace and comfort. Yes, these are hard times we’re living through, but they are pierced by this light that is building to a great crescendo (yes I know I’m mixing metaphors) with the birth of Christ. Today is December 6<sup>th</sup> – Christmas is only 19 days away. It is that close, and pandemic or not, Christmas gatherings or not, churches filled to the brim or not – Jesus is coming.

✚ I had a great conversation with my spiritual director this past week, in which she offered a definition of salvation that she came across in a book. The word salvation is simply a Latin translation of the Greek work *soteria*. If you go back to the meaning of that Greek word as it is

used in the New Testament, it has a complex meaning that encompasses having a big heart, being able to breathe deeply and being free in full health. That is what is promised for the whole world in the birth of Christ. That is what we’re waiting for.

✚ The darkness of this pandemic is stifling. It is oppressive – even depressing. I have come across so many stories and studies during this pandemic that tell us about very small-hearted behaviour and selfishness: movements of angry anti-maskers and COVID deniers. That is what this darkness can do. It can also lead to depression – the inability to breathe in the fullness of life, and there are also studies that show what a toll this pandemic is taking on our

health and well-being. COVID is a good metaphor for living in darkness.

✚ But now, there is hope and even peace settling in our hearts as that light builds around us. Perhaps now it is a bit of a glow – bright enough that we know we are almost there. As I did last week, I’m going to encourage you to stick with that glow for this coming week. Once again, hold off on the decorations. Don’t open your presents yet. There’s time for that in 19 days. Then we have an entire 12-day Christmas season to revel in it.

✚ For now, remain in the wilderness with John. Hear his words of hope. Hear the words of comfort in Isaiah. Stick with those readings all week – revisit them and bring the fears, the

anger, the frustration and loneliness of this time to your reading of scripture. Standing there in the desert with John the Baptist, can you accept his invitation to repent and get ready? In other words take all that darkness and leave it behind in the Jordan river as you emerge with John’s blessing. He’s not here yet, but Christ is on the way to grow your heart, expand your lung capacity and bring you the freedom that comes with fulness of health and life. Salvation is on the way! Relax, be at peace even in these dark times. Then when you come to Church next week, the story gets richer still as the joy builds in us. But in order for that joy to fill us, we need the bedrock of hope and peace in the assurance that God has heard our pleas, has come up with a plan and it has already begun in each one of us.