

Series: Advent Lessons

Today: Comfort for a Hurting World

Text: Isaiah 40:1-10

A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

One of my professors used to give this advice: *“Preach to the suffering and you will never lack a congregation. There is a broken heart in every pew.”*

This same advice is given to the prophet Isaiah in our text for this morning: *Comfort, comfort my people...Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received double for all her sins.”* The circumstance to which God is speaking is the end of the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon. It has been 48 years since the final destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. Cyrus the Great of Persia has conquered Babylon and issued an edict that those who had been resettled from their original homes in Israel were now free to return to their promised land.

However, the Israelites had spent nearly 50 years believing that living in exile was their fault; that it was just payment for their sins to live as exiles in a foreign land, it was going to take two things for them to believe it was the will of God that they return to their homeland: 1) They had to believe that they were really forgiven for the sins which caused their captivity; and 2) they had to believe they would survive the journey.

So to every suffering person; to every broken heart to whom I am speaking today, I want you to hear these two messages: 1) God Doesn't Hold a Grudge; 2) You Will Survive the Journey to Wholeness.

God Doesn't Hold a Grudge

As most of you know, this week marks the beginning of my final six months as your pastor. After 41 years as a pastor, I will retire at the end of June. In those 41 years the toughest message I have to sell to both believer and non believer alike is that God does not hold a grudge.

The image in the heads of the vast majority of people I meet, both believer and non believer, is that God is somehow out to get you; that there is some celestial scoreboard somewhere in the universe where God keeps track of everything we have done, and when we die, God totals the good things we have done and the bad things we have done. If the good outweighs the bad, we get to go to heaven, and if the bad outweighs the good, we go to hell.

This is not the image of God the Prophet Isaiah portrays. However, to be fair, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah had chronicled all the sins the Israelites had committed. In those chapters, likely written by different author than the writer of Chapter 40, the Israelites were reminded of their departure from their exclusive worship of God so that they could bow before the gods of the Babylonians. They were reminded that their captivity in Babylon was their own fault. Now in the 40th chapter a new paradigm emerges. The prophet speaks a word of comfort. Their sins are forgiven. They can go home again.

Author and evangelist Bruce Wilkinson tells of his first trip to Israel where he had a chance to witness this kind of healing first hand. He was on a ship that docked on the Isle of Patmos, where John wrote Revelation, and he was homesick for his family. So he walked the streets of Patmos until he found a coffee shop, sat down and prayed. "Lord, I'm in the middle of nowhere. I don't know anyone. Send someone who needs you."

The next thing he knows the guy at the next table said, "Are you off that ship?" Wilkinson told him that he was, and moved over to his table where the stranger bought him a cup of coffee. To his

surprise the fellow opened up the pain that he was carrying in his life. He said, "I just left my wife, and I'm not going back. I'm going to try to go on the ship to get to the next island so I can fly out of here."

And Wilkinson responded, "Would you believe I'm all the way from Atlanta, Georgia, for one reason—to get you back to your wife?" "Impossible," the fellow said, and for the next hour Bruce Wilkinson shared the Gospel with young man, and he made his commitment to follow Christ.

Wilkinson told him, "If you make it up with your wife before the boat leaves, you come and wave." The fellow said, "It'll never happen." To which Wilkinson responded, "You're a miracle. Give God a chance."

Wilkinson says he got on the boat, and was praying like crazy. And when he went to the back of the boat overlooking the harbor and he says he will never forget seeing this young couple coming down off the rocky cliff holding hands and waving! [Source: *Doug Banister, The Word and Power, pp. 97-98, (Zondervan, 1999)*]

You see what can happen when we are able to assure people that God doesn't hold a grudge and wants us to walk in the grace which has been offered to us in Jesus Christ? Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her time; that God does not hold a grudge.

Surviving the Journey to Wholeness

The other thing the Israelites needed to know to accept their freedom is that they would survive the journey to wholeness. To this the prophet assures them that if they trusted in God, every valley would be lifted up and the mountains would be brought low; the uneven ground would become level and the rough places would become a plain. In other words, they were saved, but the journey home is not promised to be free of obstacles. The only promise is that if they place their trust in God, the obstacles will be overcome.

There is a phrase which theologians sometimes use to talk about we who have been redeemed do not always experience the fullness of redemption. The phrase is, "The already and the not yet." How does that work exactly? Let me see if I can explain.

I found the story of a little girl by the name of Josie Caven who was born profoundly deaf. Growing up, she often felt isolated because of her inability to hear. However, at the age of 12 she received a cochlear implant during the Christmas season, and at the age of 12, she heard clearly for the first time. The first sound she heard was the song "Jingle Bells" coming from the radio.

Was Josie's hearing restored? Yes—completely. Was she hearing well immediately? Well, not exactly. Her mother said, "She has to learn what each new sound is and what it means. She will ask, 'Was that a door closing?' She has realized for the first time that the light in her room hums when it is switched on. She even knows what her name sounds like now, because before she could not hear the soft 'S' sound in the middle of the word. Seeing her face light up as she hears everything around her is all I could have wished for this Christmas."

Josie's hearing was restored, but that restoration introduced her to the daily adventure of learning to distinguish each new sound in the hearing world. It's the already, and the not yet.

Invitation to the Table

The already and the not yet; this is what we celebrate as we come to the table of the Lord. We are reminded of our salvation; of the body of Christ broken for us, and the blood of Christ shed for us that we might find our way back home again; our way back to God. We are already saved, but we have to live out that salvation in the context of this world and waiting for Christ to come again. The already and the not yet. Welcome to the table of the Lord.