

Isaiah 40: 1-9

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.
9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Trinity Presbyterian Church
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“The Voice of a Prophet”

Well, here are. The ones who braved the elements. While most of us look forward to the first snow, this one caught us by surprise. The weather experts didn't predict it. The children stayed in school all day because everyone thought it wouldn't stick. There wasn't nearly enough time for people to clear out the toilet paper racks at Wal Mart. We said, "Nah, it isn't going to snow this early in December." Well the snow crystals cascaded down from the heavens as a lovely surprise. There isn't anything quite as peaceful or as exciting as that first snow, especially when it comes out of nowhere.

Turn to our text for today, and find Israel waiting for a voice of heaven to come out of nowhere. They keep looking up to the sky, waiting for a beam of hope. Waiting for God to release them from their captivity. See them living in refugee tents in a foreign land. See their footprints leaving Jerusalem as the temple burns to the ground behind them. Footprints of adults and children carted away in chains, taken as prisoners of war. It has been 150 years since the prophet has written a single line of prophetic poetry. Maybe the grief was too strong, too paralyzing. Or maybe there was nothing to record because God was silent. The last thing the prophet wrote was a warning to Israel's king about the mighty Babylonian army that was coming, but then silence. Amid the army stomping through Jerusalem, silence. In the midst of the violence, silence. In the midst of their desperate prayers, silence. Just waiting and longing and grief-filled laments. For 150 years there was not a prose of a poem or even a punctuation mark. Israel keeps waiting for a word to come down from God.

Perhaps it is what God's people do: we keep holding on despite the evidence. Something inside of us keeps hoping against hope, even as the candle wax burns down. We keep hoping for peace even though all signs point to meaningless violence. There was a chaplain who ministered to inmates, both men and women. For advent she asked them to write down what they were waiting for this advent season. They answered with a poem:

"I am waiting for freedom...

I am waiting for a better time...

I am waiting for God to stop saying 'not yet'...

I am waiting on waiting!"¹

Waiting on waiting...on waiting...on waiting. We know how it feels. Sometimes it feels like we are trapped inside the snow-globe of waiting. We see it on the faces of our African American friends. The Civil War may have emancipated, and the Civil Rights movement may have legislated, but equality for People of Color has never arrived. Still waiting... We hear it in the

¹ See the full list at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1571>

voices of the LGBTQ community, who know what it is like to wait for love to be recognized. We had hoped the fight was over, but now a battle in the courts over a wedding cake has us waiting again. Some of us are waiting on a Christmas miracle as we watch a loved one deteriorate, or we are waiting for the tumor to shrink, or we are waiting for the family to be all together again. We see it on our tired faces, we hear it in our weary voices, we feel it in our yearning souls. We keep waiting on waiting...on waiting...on waiting.

But today we listen to God's voice penetrating the silence. "Comfort, comfort my people!" Tell them it is time. Tell them that they are forgiven. Tell them they have served their sentence and are set free to come home!" The word that comes down to the people is first and foremost a word of forgiveness. God's peace blanketing the landscape of human violence. God's forgiveness clinging to us like snow collecting on the trees. A year or so ago, after the terror attack in Paris, a U.S. veteran had had enough of "them." That night he drank too much at the bar and at 2 a.m. grabbed his high-powered rifle, pointed it at the local Mosque's windows and squeezed off several rounds. The Mosque is literally named, "Baitul Aman"—which means "House of Peace." The man was quickly arrested, tossed in prison, charged with a hate crime. But the next day, the first thing the Muslim Community did was visit the man and offer him forgiveness. It came as a surprise to him, but doesn't it sound just like God? The poet picks up her pen for the first time in 150 years and what is the first thing she writes? "Comfort, comfort my people; you are forgiven! You are set free! God is doing something new, so collect your things and begin paving the roadway home."

So now comes the question: how do we construct a pathway? How do we take our liberation and use it as a highway for others? It's a surprise, but the answer is right here in verse 9: "Lift up your voice with strength...lift it up, do not fear!" The poetry cuts through the heart of the status quo and says speak up, do not fear! This week, Time Magazine released their Person of the Year. You may have heard the news. They are the women, and some men, who have courageously spoken up against the sexual violence that plagues our patriarchal system.

But the pathway had to be forged. Did you know that one year ago, after the tape came out where a presidential candidate was recorded speaking, "locker room talk," the country's largest sexual assault hotline jumped 33% in one weekend? Then just before the second presidential debate, a writer told her story on Twitter and asked other women to share theirs. Within one evening, she had received over one million responses. The pathway began with voices rising up. Then last January hundreds of thousands of women marched in Washington, some of them right here in our church. Then it opened up a movement on social media which is paving the path for our children's future with women speaking up and saying, #metoo. Statistics would say that there are at least a few of us here who have experienced some form of assault. And do you remember what Time Magazine has named these women? They call them, "The Silence Breakers." The Silence Breakers. Friends that is as close to a biblical definition of a prophet you are going to find: to break the silence with the truth, in order to forge the pathway for God's vision—where mountains are brought down, valleys are raised high. They are the voices that

cry out in the wilderness despite cultural ridicule and shame. They are the voices that break the silence, so a new way can be paved for everyone. “Lift up your voices with strength...lift them up, do not be afraid!”

They are the voices—they are your voices—heralding the news that God is on the move once again with a liberating word. A word which penetrates the silence, and always comes through the voice of a prophet.