

Teach our hearts to welcome peace

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Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85, Mark 1:1-8I

Isaiah 40:1-11 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, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall 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 grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of our God stands forever. TBTG

What gives you comfort? When do you feel that bone-deep sense of peace, that there's nothing in the world that can shake you off balance, that you belong, that you are safe and loved? Nathan, Katherine, and Heather shared some of their comforts: hugs, breakfast in bed, breathing in God's presence. Sharing family traditions.

Generally, I feel peaceful when the laundry is folded and put away, the house is swept and dusted, and my eternal stacks of papers are filed. When there's a good meal ready. But a former roommate commented that she could always tell when I was upset about something because I'd go on a cleaning binge. If you could see my house now, you'd think I've been a little too complacent lately. True. Peace is not the same as complacency.

Things that give me external peace only come with work: chopping the onions, breaking the eggs, running the vacuum, tumbling the clothes in the machines. Agitation precedes peace and prepares the way for it. I think the same thing may be true spiritually. You realize something's a mess; you get upset about it; you seek a solution; you try to fix it. In churchy terms it's called repentance, forgiveness, and amendment of life. We have to be shaken up a little to get to a place of comfort and peace.

Nothing we hear about John the Baptist paints an obvious picture of peace. He sounds like a strange, deranged person. Weird clothes. Yucky dietary habits. If we saw him in downtown Rochester, we'd probably cross the street, maybe call 911. No question, he was agitated and he was an agitator. But people didn't rush to get away from him; they flocked to him, repenting. He baptized them - he promised them forgiveness. Forgiveness flowed all over them. He sent them back to their lives, transformed. Mark's Gospel doesn't give us the backstory that the other Gospels do. John just "appeared," waving his arms and yelling. He broadcast the upsetting news about sin and repentance in order to make way for the good news that was hitting the airwaves next: the good news of Jesus. Agitation precedes peace and prepares the way.

What was the draw? I think John the Baptist felt the same kind of inner authority as Jesus.¹ Like Jesus, he went to the wilderness on a vision quest. He called others to the same quest: Come to the wilderness; come home to yourself. Figure out what's wrong and go from there. Repentance isn't just about apologizing for messing up. It's finding strength and resilience in the resolve to do better, to find peace in a new life, even if that new life looks turbulent on the outside.

Our young people mentioned how Etty Hillesum made the conscious decision to share the fate of her Jewish comrades in the concentration camp. She came to peace with that decision only after long inner wrestling, but she eventually wrote in her journal, "Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it toward others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will also be in our troubled

¹ See the PCUSA Advent Devotions for Monday, November 30, for more on "inner authority."

world.” Her book, *An Interrupted Life*, has inspired generations to seek inner peace in order to make peace in the world. It doesn’t happen without a struggle. For her, the disruption was watching the genocide of her people. Etty Hillesum did not survive the Holocaust; another Jewish writer, Victor Frankl, did. In his classic work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, he also speaks of the “inner freedom” that gives a person the strength to make meaning out of suffering, to become an example to others. It was his own terrible experience in the camps that taught him this. Inner authority, inner freedom comes only after agitation.

This Advent finds the world in a state of agitation. Do you long for peace, as I do? Do you yearn for a return to some kind of normal? At the same time, I can’t stop grasping for meaning in the disruption. What is this about? What is it for? What comes next? “Comfort, O comfort my people,” God commands in the passage from Isaiah that we heard echoed in the music of Handel’s Messiah. What we forget is that the comfort of their return to home to Jerusalem followed 200 years of exile in Babylon, 200 years of being uprooted from their home, their temple, 200 years of questioning God’s love and presence. Complacency is not an option when your world is turned upside down. But peace is an option. Comfort is available to us. “You *will* be nurtured, led, carried,” God assures them and us. But first you have to prepare the way. And the way may lead you through more upheaval.

I keep returning to the conviction that right now the world is being shaken for a reason, and that we are being shaken out of our complacency, too. The protests, the uprisings, following the murder of George Floyd and others this year earned mixed reviews. People of all races got behind the Black Lives Matter movement. People also deplored the violence that accompanied some of the protests. But when you understand the history, as the Presbytery’s spiritual pilgrimage is teaching, the wonder is not that violence erupted, but that people had the energy, the inner authority, and inner freedom, after being beaten down for so long, to resist at all. And the movement’s greatest triumphs owe their success to the inner spiritual authority of people who led under the banner of *nonviolence*.

When I think of the church today, I feel the potential for incredible movement. I feel the stirring of amazing power - and it is a power rooted in the inner authority of people who hear and heed the voice of God *now*, in this sick, burdened, tumultuous world. I see the church as a sleeping giant that God is awakening. God is opening our eyes, revealing the suffering of the world, showing us our complicity in it, commanding us, “Comfort! O comfort my people! Now! Tell them that change is coming. Make a straight highway for God’s justice, God’s mercy, God’s peace to prevail.” We have lived for a long time in the complacency of feeling “blessed.” Now is the time to wage the inward battle for clarity of purpose in the face of what we can no longer avoid or ignore. The time for sleep is over. Advent is more than a wake-up call to each one of us; it’s a call to action for all of us. Peace is only possible when we face turmoil head on.

Can you imagine what will happen when God's faithful people rise up with the moral and spiritual authority of John the Baptist? Of the prophet Isaiah? Of Jesus himself? Your comfort and peace, and the peace of the whole world, depend on this. Comfort, peace, and joy are the goals of God's reign. But agitation precedes peace. Turmoil precedes triumph. We are God's agents on earth. We are God's instruments. God calls us out into the wilderness, to a place we haven't known, to a vision quest for healing. Do you want your children, your grandchildren, to know a different future, a better one?² Then gather your courage now and change the present! And hang on tight, because the world is about to turn. **Amen.** TBTG

Prayers

All holy, all knowing, ever-present God, wake us out from sleep into the glorious work of your reign on earth. We are your people; use us!

All healing, all merciful God: visit each suffering soul with comfort and relief as we watch and wait for the tide of sickness to turn, and our damaged world to be repaired.

You have given us to one another as a sacred trust; those closest to us are ours to love and care for: especially all who are gathered into this community of faith: we pray for continued healing; for courage and resilience; we pray for wisdom and protection for those who travel; fullness of life to all those we name in our hearts.

We feel the ache of absence so much during this season: for loved ones who must keep a distance, and loved ones who have passed through death into your eternal love. Our hearts still ache for them! Comfort, comfort these your people, and carry them tenderly through their grief.

The sorrows of our world are many, but with your power and wisdom, we can stand against all of them and prevail; in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

² Paraphrased from Peter Maurin, quoted in Richard Rohr daily devotions, Tuesday, December 1, 2020.

I am also indebted to my spiritual director for her insightful words about the positive aspects of agitation!