

## **Nov 30      Safe in the Lap of God**

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, it is a word that we do not associate with God as much as we should, especially when we think of how God is portrayed in the Old Testament. Words like wrathful and judgmental more often come to mind. This passage in Isaiah shares this important attribute of God. It marks a turning point in the Book of Isaiah. Up until now the prophet has been speaking words of judgment against Jerusalem. Those words came true when in 587 BCE Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire. The leaders and a significant part of the population were marched off to Babylon. The Jerusalem prophets made it unmistakably clear that the destruction of the city and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength; they were a well-deserved punishment from God. Isaiah 40:1 declares now the time of punishment is at an end. It is done with such intimacy and compassion. When you hear God's command to "Speak tenderly" it means literally: "speak to the heart". It is sharing that God has seen their pain and cares. This great poem of comfort ends with: "He will gather lambs into his arms and lift them onto his lap." (CEB trans.) This is the best image of true comfort that I can imagine. It is one I want you to hold on to throughout the service and beyond.

When our children were small or now when Sophi is upset what do they want most? They want to snuggle up in your lap and be reassured. There is something comforting to have your being surrounded by big strong arms. Even our cat, on an almost nightly basis, has to come and sit on my lap. The rest of the day he could care less if I exist, that is after I give him his breakfast, but at night, he needs that reassurance. I want you to have that image of a child or pet on your lap. I want you to think of the sighs of comfort that they exude knowing they are safe and loved. I want you to think of a time your beloved enveloped you in their arms and how safe and reassuring this was. This is the promise God gives to you. God is holding you in those loving arms. Let us see how this image is expanded in this scripture.

What is striking at the start of Isaiah 40 is not that there are persons in need of comfort, after all they have been sent into exile, it is that God commands that they be

comforted. In the context of the Book of Isaiah, Jerusalem is hardly a sympathetic character. Chapter after chapter describes how the people of Jerusalem prospered through wickedness, oppression, lies and injustice, refusing to heed the prophets' calls to repent, reform and be reconciled to God. Jerusalem's "term" is completed and "her penalty is paid." But why should she receive comfort? Persons who serve time for a crime do not typically receive comfort on the day of their release. They have been judged deserving of their penalty and now must prove their worthiness. Moreover, the likelihood of them returning to their old ways is high. The voice speaking in verses 6-8 acknowledges their steadfastness is fleeting; "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." This voice sees a future for the people of Jerusalem no different from their past. The people of Jerusalem are not "deserving" of comfort according to the norms of justice as we understand it, but God insists -- no, *commands* -- that they be comforted. God is like a loving parent or the caring shepherd. God sees comfort as a gift, a right, not something to be earned. We need to let this truth seep deep into our souls. God wants to comfort us and we are to be a source of comfort for others.

There are several ways that God extends comfort through this passage. They are words of hope for us as well. The first expression of comfort is the way they are to be identified: "my people," says God (40:1). Though multiple chapters of Isaiah illuminate actions that are incompatible with God's desires and end in punishment, God continues to identify as their God. God does not overlook or ignore those behaviors but all people should know that God has not abandoned Jerusalem. God intends that they will have a future together.

This is a reminder to us. God does not abandon us when we misbehave. So often I have had conversations that go like this, "Pastor, I hear you talk about God forgiving us and unconditional love. I would like to believe it but..." and then they go on to share or allude to some dark event in their past. They believe that this has cut them off from this comfort and grace. God tells you as he did the people of Israel, you are mine. We don't deserve it. We can't earn it. It is a gift. We would never tell a child or grandchild that they cannot sit on our laps when they are feeling sad. We invite them

because we know it helps. When we were with our newest granddaughter Gwen it was awesome to get to hold her. Tiny as she is she responds to that embrace. We know because all of her vital signs that are carefully monitored improve when she is held. We are held in the arms of God. We are unconditionally given comfort because we are beloved.

The second way we are to find comfort is to hear that we are released from our debt to sins. The verse notes that Jerusalem “has served her term” but there is also the word that “her penalty is paid.” The reference to “term” connects the exile to punishment, but the announcement of a penalty paid suggests divine grace in the release. The ultimate statement of our debt to sin being paid is to be found in the sacrificial death of Jesus. The slate is wiped clean. It should be a word of great joy, and comfort to hear again that we do not need to carry the debt with us. We are not like a paroled felon who has done their time but their past dogs them every step of the way. We may have had to deal with the consequences of our actions but now that is in the past, new life awaits. It is just like when I hold Sophi on my lap when she is upset or just needs a snuggle time. Ultimately it is a time of healing. She knows she is loved and whatever past deed that was done that made her upset is forgotten. God cancels our debts and says forget it.

The third message of comfort comes in the announcement of God’s coming to be with them. In Isaiah 40 the commands to “comfort” and to “speak tenderly” are immediately followed by the instruction to “Prepare the way of the LORD”. The pathway is not through the cities and towns like a conquering warrior but through the desert and wilderness, where the settlement and survival of human and other living creatures is precarious. The location of this path is unstated. It could be imagined to be in the desert between the cities of Jerusalem and Babylon or it could recall the Exodus journey of deliverance through the wilderness of Sinai. Or it could be a metaphor for the desolation and despondency of the Jerusalemites in Babylon. That the LORD’s coming is comfort, not withering judgment, is clear in the transformation of the wilderness and desert: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain”. It is a reminder to all of us

that when we are navigating difficult moments God is with us. God is bringing comfort and most importantly God is creating a new future.

Just as the conclusion of a prison term does not, by itself, result in a better tomorrow, the end of the Babylonian period does not ensure that what lies ahead will be any different for the exiles. But for their sake, God chooses to be involved in that future. The deepest comfort and greatest joy is the power of God at work in their midst, providing, protecting and guiding them with gentleness. God is always choosing to be involved in our future, not angry for the past. God rejoices when we find the way.

We send a child away from our laps to enjoy life. God, when we are feeling bad wants us to know that we are loved and that a better tomorrow awaits. You don't have to feel bad about past mistakes. God forgives. You are encouraged to try again, to go forward into new beginnings knowing you are loved. This is the great news of our faith. It is a message that we need to share with all. We need to extend love, forgiveness and comfort to all just as freely as we do to those most beloved of us because ultimately all of us carry bits of brokenness, all of us are hurting and all of us need love. When it is given freely and without condition we are living our faith and sharing a gift God gives to us.