

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent

December 5-6, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3: 8-14; Mark 1: 1-8

Preacher: Deni Mack

We hear today's words from the prophet Isaiah: God asks us to "Comfort, give comfort to my people."

Peter, age 47, loving husband and father of 3 said, "I was detached from the pain of people. I didn't give comfort. I mean, I'd see this stuff on TV and ignore it, shrugging, I couldn't do anything about it. Then I read of a Dutch rabbi who was a child when a Gestapo captain said, 'What a pity this is a Jewish child.' A neighbor responded, 'No it is not a pity. He is blessed to be a Jewish child because he will not grow up the child of murderers.'

"The enraged Gestapo captain screamed, 'We will be back to take you in the morning. Pack.' The Dutch rabbi said, 'a Catholic family took me into their arms, hid me, raised me, saved me. So, I am forever aware that we need each other. Your faith is indispensable to my own. I understand very well what good Muslims, good Jews and good Christians do. We must each be the best for one another that we can be.'" Peter went on to say, "learning of that Dutch rabbi's experience has totally changed my narrow thinking. How had I missed it that all religions teach how to live?"

Together we looked at Isaiah's "comfort give comfort," and "speak tenderly," and today's psalm, "Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss."

I asked Peter, "do all of those who say they practice their religion give comfort with kindness and speak truth with justice?" Peter answered me, thoughtfully, "Deni, no, I was a church goer who didn't give comfort. I tried to climb over people at work. And Christmas? I thought that was for getting lots of stuff. That Dutch rabbi's story made me look at my soul, myself."

The repentance today's Gospel asks for includes humbly acknowledging our sins. John the Baptist preached hope, assuring people they were not bound up by wrongs and corruption. He helped them and us find power within to

change the world. What stresses stifle our kindness? What distractions lure us away from giving comfort and showing kindness to people near and far? Do we succumb to advertising and think love is shown by costly gifts or that success is shown by status and possessions? My friend Peter said he had.

The human psyche, the soul, the self—we're not always on track. Covid helps me see clearly how full my cupboards are while others have nothing. The only thing to do is own up to God. Our humble honesty, looking hard at how we live and how some barely survive helps us repent for letting our rivers turn into industrial sewers, some essential workers have to live in their old cars and the people of Yemen starve. Our humble honesty helps us acknowledge how we can comfort not only one another but far away refugees struggling to find safety. Repentance washes away even seemingly trivial self-deceptions and helps us draw closer to being the person, the church and the nation we want to be.

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God asks the same of us that he asked our spiritual ancestors—"give comfort." Still there are always hundreds of thousands more who need comfort. We think we are too small and too weak to give all that comfort.

Yet 587 years before Christ, God's people who survived Babylonian's terrors, suffered each step of the near thousand mile trek as slaves through what is today Lebanon, Syria and Iraq to Babylon. They gradually discovered Isaiah's Book of Consolation showing God never abandoning them. God showed them and shows us "the way of the lord."

During this pandemic, despite heavy burdens, we recognize ways God helps us give comfort near and far. For thousands of years we've listened, just as Jesus did, to the prophet Isaiah saying, "give comfort." What better way to live? As we humbly realize we are not worthy to tie Jesus' sandal straps,

God is building us into a new people, a people who “give comfort,” “speak tenderly” and act with “kindness” clearly demonstrating that “justice and peace shall kiss.”