

“I’ll Throw the Kettle On”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 8, 2019 - Second Sunday of Advent

We read from the book of the prophet Isaiah just last week — the bit about the wolf and the lamb and how a little child shall lead them. That was from chapter 11 of the book, written in the 700s BC as a prophet of the Southern Kingdom of Judah watched as the North fell and tried to guide Judah to trust God to avoid a similar fate.

Now we’re in chapter 40, which most scholars believe was written much later — 150-200 years later. The South did finally fall to the Babylonians and people were sent into exile. The section of Isaiah that begins with our reading seems to have been written toward the end of the exile, as a new power has arisen in the east — Cyrus the Great of Persia — and the Babylonians’ days are numbered.

Isaiah can see the light at the end of the tunnel. The fortunes are turning. And so he delivers a message of comfort and restoration from God. We’ll hear about plans to make a superhighway in the wilderness so that as the people return from exile, their God can lead them back home. We’ll hear a reminder that the word of God is the only eternal thing. And we’ll hear of God’s movement to bring wholeness and peace.

Listen now to the Word of God from chapter 40 of the book of the prophet Isaiah::

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim 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 proclaim?”

“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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The first words of Handel's *Messiah* are from these verses. And if you have ever heard a tenor sing "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people..." and you have, in that moment of sacred beauty unfurling before you, imagined that he was inviting the audience over for some afternoon biscuits and some Earl Grey, you are in very good company.

They serve tea and delicious sandwiches at the café in Puerto Rico where I saw a message painted in giant letters across an entire wall:

¿Cuánto tiempo te Quedarás Conmigo? ¿Preparo Café o Preparo Mi Vida?

"How much time will you stay with me? Do I prepare coffee or prepare my life?"

I find this terribly romantic.

Which is it?

Have my plans changed? Or have our *plans* changed?

Coffee? Or my life?

And with all the ennui and despair of a French film student, the voice in Isaiah says, "All people are grass!"

The Advent poet in my heart cries, "Yes! Yes! Both! Coffee! Life! Grass! The Word of God!"

Imagine having been carted off to Babylon and had your name changed to something less *ethnic*-sounding and not knowing if you would ever see your home or your neighbors or your family again, and then you hear that God is commanding some sort of heavenly host to bring comfort to the people of God. Or perhaps you misheard even then, but I wonder if hearing God say, "Come for tea, my people," wouldn't be nearly as much of a blessing!

Remember, if you can, a moment of despair when it seemed your life had been shoved through a door not of your choosing and there was no way to go but forward, yet forward looked completely unmanageable. Perhaps you can then recall a massive shift that changed everything for the better. More likely, you can name something closer to a cup of tea poured out by someone who knew the look of one shoved through a door not of their choosing and who could not fix it but could offer a wee comfort and some silence, some distraction, some wisdom, some inappropriate humor.

For me it is Bubble Tape and Super Mario Bros.

One night in October of third grade, after a couple years of loud and scary arguments, my mom ordered me and my brother into the car, and we left our house and the dog and my dad behind. I had no way of knowing that the moment would lead, eventually, to so much more peace and health in my family. I would have given all my baseball cards for someone to wave a magic wand and make everything perfect, like I

imagined other families must be.

We drove to the deli so my mom could buy a pack of cigarettes and, without either of us saying a word, she bought a roll of Bubble Tape for me (original) and one for my brother (grape). If you're not familiar with the product, it was brand new at the time, came in a round dispenser, and was "six-feet of bubble gum — for you, not them."

We showed up unannounced at the house of my mom's best friend, Chris. Chris, who died a few years ago, was somehow louder and more outrageous than my mom. She came out to find us in the driveway, saw the tears, and let loose a string of expletives directed at my father for her entire neighborhood to hear. Thankfully, her teenage son and daughter, who I idolized, quickly came out to shush their mom and bring us inside. While Chris and her husband attended to my mom, Jason and Nikki took us to the rec room to play Nintendo. I laughed so much that night.

Imagine you'd heard about a new prophet in town. Well, not "in town" exactly. You had to go out into the wilderness to hear what he had to say. His name was John and he was really into baptizing people. And yelling at them. He ate locusts and wild honey and ran around in camel-hair clothing and it seemed like he might have been mixing whatever wilderness herbs he could find in with his locusts. You wondered if the prophets your ancestors had listened to — or, really, *not* listened to — back before and during the exile had been quite as kooky as this John guy.

He's getting ready for another long rant and you think he might call us all a brood of vipers again, but first he hollers: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." And you know that line, from the scroll of Isaiah. John speaks of one who is coming who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit." As you head home and make a mental note to be sure to check in with the tax collector for the Romans so you don't run afoul of the empire, you wonder, "Is there a chance that ol' Honey John knows that something is on the horizon?"

Isaiah speaks, a few chapters past our passage, of Cyrus the Great of Persia as God's "anointed" — God's *meshiach*, from which we get the word "Messiah." David and all the kings who were anointed get that some title. Cyrus will indeed come and knock the Babylonians off and will allow the people to return and Jerusalem to be rebuilt — more on that next week! — and the prophet is grateful.

So do Isaiah's proclamations about redemption and restoration and feeding the flock and gathering the lambs into the heavenly arms refer to a new king to be anointed — to God choosing this outsider from the East to save the people from the Babylonians? Or is Isaiah talking about something more cosmic, more eternal, like *the* Messiah, the big one, the savior?

Do I prepare coffee? Or do I prepare my life?

Yes.

All life is grass. The Word of God will stand forever.

Yes.

Is that “‘Comfort, O comfort my people,’ says your God” piece simply us getting to eavesdrop on the council of heaven, or is there instruction in that for us too? As we are comforted, are we to be bringers of comfort?

Yes.

Frontera de Cristo is one of the Presbyterian Church (USA) border ministries, working in Douglas, Arizona and just across the border in Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico. Their work is about providing health care and resources and education and community development on both sides of the border to transform lives and foster relationships and increase understanding. *Preparo mi vida.*

Next Sunday, after our truly delightful Christmas pageant, we’ll hold our sixth annual Mission Bake Sale Auction. You can prepare a plate of cookies, or a tray of brownies, or a pie or a cake or some spicy crackers. Or you can simply prepare to bid on all these tasty treats. A few hours spent combining ingredients, followed by a half-hour of furious bidding. Simple and fun. *Preparo café.*

Every dollar we raise will go straight to Douglas, Arizona to provide diabetes education and breast cancer prevention and parenting classes and the basic needs of the recently deported and emergency assistance for families in distress and so much more.

We pray for peace and the Christ (the Anointed) says, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”
We yearn for light and the Christ (the Anointed) says, “You are the light of the world.”
We cling to what withers and fades and the Christ (the Word of God) says,
“I am the resurrection and the life”

The word “advent” simply means the arrival of someone or something notable.
He will arrive in glory as a celestial choir sings.
They will sing to a field of nobodies. And a bunch of sheep.

He will arrive in prophecy and angelic proclamation.
He will be born to a teenage girl in a working class family.

He will arrive in the immensity of everlasting life.
He will show up when the kettle whistles.

Be ready for everything to change in an outbreak of hope.
Be prepared to notice the wink of peace.

And do not fear, for there is good news of great joy ahead.
Amen.