

Wait! For Peace...

We have moved from the end of the Christian calendar with the Reign of Christ into the new Christian year, which is marked by Advent.

We spend a lot of time waiting; in life, in the church, in business, in most everything.

Each year the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary choose one of the three Synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark and Year C is Luke. This year marks Year B. And I have to tell you, I'm not a fan of the designated Gospel readings for Advent, Year B. It feels like it's all John, all the time. Mary gets a small mention, when really, she does the heavy lifting.

Okay, Jesus can't be considered Messiah until he's presented as such. We know, from Hebrew Scripture, that the Son of God cannot come to earth until he is introduced. In the Hebrew scripture, we're waiting on Elijah to introduce the Messiah. In Christian scripture we have come to know John as the one to introduce Jesus. That's wonderful! A job well done, John. But seriously, three weeks? Mary gave Jesus LIFE. She deserves more air time than John.

So, this year I've decided to focus mostly on the Hebrew Scriptures, and expand into the themes of each week of Advent.

Last week was Week One – Hope. I understand your Lessons and Carols Service was fabulous and I thank everyone who participated as a reader, soloist, attendee.

This week's theme is Peace. And it seems we have been waiting for peace, as a world, forever. I don't mean only Peace as in the absence of War, but peace, as in the deep freedom from disturbance or tranquility.

The reading from Isaiah is the first chapter in Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah, a series of oracles, songs and discourses, believed to have been written in the sixth century.

It has been set to music since 1551 by Claude Goudimel. The hymn set in Anglican Chant is very melodic, calm and light. It is a paraphrase of the first five verses of Isaiah 40.

Comfort, Comfort ye my people; speak ye peace, thus says your God.
Comfort those who sit in darkness bowed beneath oppression's load;
speak ye to Jerusalem of the peace that waits for them:
tell her that her sins I cover, and her warfare now is over.

It is not meant to be rushed...the music washes over gently and lightly.

I like Claude Goudimel's setting. It is the best kind peace...one that is unhurried. A kind of waiting that is necessary and often difficult to obtain.

Isaiah 40.1-11 is about comforting one who is going through a tremendously difficult time. In this case the "she" that is mentioned relates to the city of Jerusalem. In the early sixth century, Jerusalem as a city was nearly destroyed with the first temple. It was a time of tremendous fear and anxiety. Everything was in disarray as war raged on.

Isaiah 40 is for the city of Jerusalem, that she is no longer to be considered cursed; in fact, she will rebuild even stronger than before.

Isaiah writes:

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. (Isaiah 40.1-2, NRSV)

How many of you have ever felt peace? I mean the deep peace that comes from God. The kind of peace that casts a weight and yet you feel weightless. The kind of peace where you feel that maybe it's not a dumpster fire we are in the middle of, but in fact, we are coming through something transformational.

The world is in a difficult place. Most of us know there is a global pandemic that, at times, seems to be getting the better of us. We are now in the "second wave" which is proving to be worse than the first. There is talk of a vaccine, but when? And from where? Who will be eligible? Will we have to get a booster afterwards?

We have been distancing ourselves from each other, socially and physically for nine months now. And for me, in some cases, I'm feeling emotionally and even spiritually removed from some things. Which is difficult. Nothing is as it once was. And it will never again be as it once was.

We can look at this with fear and trepidation, or we can look at this with hope and peace. We can consider our lives crushed and battered, or we can consider our lives renewed and re-calibrated. It is a process, within which, we remain.

I have not seen my mother face to face, other than photographs in 16 months. I have talked to my brother and sister in law by phone, and have video chatted with my grandchildren and my nephews, for which I am grateful. But nothing compares to a hug.

Someone I love very much and have known for thirteen years died, suddenly and unexpectedly just over two weeks ago. I've not been able to properly grieve for him and, I'm uncertain as to why. I spent part of my birthday on a video call with St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Ontario planning his funeral. He entrusted his wishes to me and when his daughter asked if could do that, I was honoured and prepared to do so.

His funeral will be on the 15th of December and I will be preaching and giving the eulogy. In other circumstances I would be in London on that day to help his children and brother's as well as work with my colleagues to see that his wishes are respected and followed.

We are in a pandemic and I cannot go to London. Thankfully, his daughter Sarah, his son Matthew and his brothers Keith and Terry understand. Because of advances in technology, I will be able to join by Zoom. It's not ideal, but it is the best we can do.

And that's something.

When we look at the world in the 6th century, with the devastation of Jerusalem and we look at the world in the 21st century, with global pandemic and widespread fear and chaos, it's easy to draw a connecting line. What may be more difficult is to realise that while God was there to provide comfort and peace for God's children, God continues to be with us in this challenging time, as we are God's children.

The message of God's peace in Isaiah 40 is transcendent of time and place.

Isaiah writes:

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. (Isaiah 40.10-11)

As we move through the next two weeks of Advent, a time of waiting and anticipation, the words of Isaiah resonate. God will feed us, God's flock, like a shepherd. We will be gathered in God's arms and brought comfort and peace. We will be cared for as a mother sheep cares for her lambs. We will be loved as a parent calms an anxious child.

We need to remember to breathe. Really and truly breathe, deeply and fully.

We need to wash our hands, often and thoroughly, for at least 20 seconds. When we cannot wash our hands, we need to use hand sanitizer.

We need to wear masks whenever we are in public or in a building. In short, whenever we are not alone, we should wear a mask. It's a minor irritation that could, literally, save someone's life.

You see, my brother's and sister's, it's a matter of perspective. We can choose to live in abject fear...terrified of the stranger. We can choose to disregard the rules because we aren't sick and don't know anybody that's been sick, so what's the big deal anyway?

We can choose to wear a mask as a form of loving-service to our neighbours...and ourselves. It's not forever, it's only for now. And yes, I know that's not very specific and it's already been a long time.

I miss my family, very much. Even my brother. I also miss David Fuller. He gave the very best hugs. He loved with every part of himself. His love was pure and to be loved by him was to experience something divine. And while I won't be able to hug his family, I will do as I promised and deliver the best eulogy and funeral sermon I have ever delivered. Likely through tears.

God will be with me. As God is with us now. Today, we are able to gather virtually at the table and partake in the sacrament of communion. The ordinary made extraordinary. The lowly – exalted and the common – transformed to something transcendent.

Not because of me. Because of God. So as we gather on this second Sunday of Advent, my beloved sisters and brothers, I wish you the deepest Peace. Amen.

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Isaiah 40.1-11

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