

Comfort in an Uncomfortable Time

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Isaiah 40:1-11

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The morning flood of news stories brought this one a few days ago: “Churchgoer Gets COVID After Saying ‘I’m Willing to Die for My Religion.’”

I read with interest.

A devout Church person took to social media to tell anyone who would listen: “I don’t know who needs to hear this, but this is a reminder that I’m willing to die for my religion. If I get COVID attending mass then I’ll deal with it, but I’m not missing out on worshiping. You don’t get to bar me from my religion because you’re scared. Be mad. Don’t care.”

A few days later, the same person shared the following message: “I don’t know how to say this casually but I tested positive for COVID. I’d really really appreciate some prayers for my husband and I. He has a pre-existing condition and I’m really worried about him.”

According to the story from Newsweek, the Twitter account no longer exists.

There are probably a wide variety of possible comments these statements could provoke, from sympathy to schadenfreude. But one aspect of these messages actually speaks directly to the message of the Prophet Isaiah, and that’s what I would like for us to concentrate on for a moment today. In the first message the person writes, “You don’t get to bar me from my religion because you’re scared.”

So, we might ask: What is religion? What is the worship of God?

As it happens, this person and we share the same religion. We’re Christians. It doesn’t really matter for the sake of our reflections what brand is printed on the package, “Protestant” or “Roman Catholic.” “It don’t matter whose in Austin, Bob Wills is still the king.” And it doesn’t matter whether our denomination’s headquarters are in Louisville or Rome, so is Jesus. Let’s just stay with what we have in common, and our correspondent and we are both Christian.

So, now, let me take us back to the eighth century BC, to those years between 740 and 700 BC, when the Prophet Isaiah flourished at the center of Judaea public life. Specifically, let’s take ourselves back to where the book of Isaiah really takes off: “In the year that King Uzziah died” Isaiah was confronted by the Lord God himself as he made offerings to the Lord on behalf of his people in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Isaiah the Prophet held a position of power and influence in Judaea during that time when Israel and Judaea were two separate kingdoms. He advised the King, he was the leader of a school of prophets, he was a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem, and he actively preached.

As his book of prophecy opens, we find him overcome by the presence of The Lord God in the Holy place. Fierce angelic beings, seraphim (think dragons more than winged babies) fly around the throne of God singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." In the presence of pure holiness, Isaiah bows, cringes, confesses, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips."

One of the awesome angelic beings draws a burning coal from the altar, and places it upon Isaiah's lips. And the Lord asks, "Who shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And Isaiah, without hesitation, answers, "Here am I. Send me."

I've heard sermons stop here, but to do so gives a distorted picture of God's commission for Isaiah, and Isaiah's full response. If we stop here we can't possibly understand today's text later in the book of Isaiah. Nor will we be able to answer the questions with which we began, "What is religion? What is the worship of God?"

Because, as soon as Isaiah says "Send me," the Lord tells Isaiah what he has to say. Isaiah has to tell the people, "Try to understand all you want, but you will not discern. Try to see, and you will not perceive. Try to listen, but callouses will grow over your ears and you will not hear." This is the sermon Isaiah is called to preach.

The people of God have ignored God for so long, in other words, that God is allowing them to reap the full consequences of their faithlessness and selfishness. They rejected wisdom, let them wallow in folly; they didn't want to look at the needs around them, let their eyes be sealed shut; they ignored the cries of the helpless, and the Word of the Lord, let their ears be closed. And Isaiah is the prophet God has chosen to bear his message to closed minds, closed ears and closed eyes.

You can almost imagine Isaiah nodding his head after God tells him what he must do. "Right. Okay. I said I'm here, send me. Fine. I'll do it. But, just so I can plan my calendar, O Lord of Host, how long exactly do you want me to keep preaching this sermon?"

And the Lord replies, "Until cities lie ruined, empty and forsaken, and fields and vineyards are desolate, and the survivors left in the land have been captured and carted away into exile." Until the full and terrible consequences of the people fall upon them.

When we come to Isaiah chapter 40, our text this week, you see, decades have passed, generations have lived and died, and lived and died again and again, and we are on the other side of judgement. We are on the other shore of the peoples' suffering the weight of the consequences of their lives which God foretold in the beginning of the book of Isaiah.

God in our text today asks his prophet to comfort his ravaged people, his humbled, even humiliated, people, a people whose ears finally on the far side of judgement have been opened to the suffering of others by their own suffering, a people whose tears for so long now have mingled with the rivers of exile so that they are ready at last to understand, ready at last to see and to hear.

God used history to teach his people. God used history like a hammer to forge a new spirit within this people. And what did he teach them?

Well, he didn't teach them that as long as the sacrifices in the Temple are made by the priests according to Hoyle, everything is just fine. No. The Temple had been running at full capacity throughout the days when God's people strayed. What they thought was religion was doing a brisk business the whole time the people were becoming less faithful and more cruel.

The Lord didn't teach them that religion is a matter of getting the rituals right, stand-up, sit-down, kneel here, bow there, mutter this, and go on your way unchanged. No. He didn't teach them that they could count on the worship of other gods to bring them security, plenty, good crops, bountiful families, while they practiced a mere religion of form.

He taught them that faith is a matter of relationship with God that issues forth in life, that worship is a living reality of service to and for others. A true life bears testimony to a true faith. They learned in bitter exile that nothing and no one could keep them from faith and worship wherever they found themselves, even when they found themselves weeping by the waters of Babylon.

The comfort which the prophet brings to God's people isn't the comfort of a soft sofa into which they can snuggle, it isn't a cocoon of down and soft cotton, a duvet of divine warmth in which to wrap themselves. Their comfort is the frank reminder of what they lost through duplicity and selfishness and cruelty and contempt; their comfort is a memorial never to forget that faith consists in carrying into the world the character of God, not in insisting on getting your own way.

The book of Isaiah reminds me of a passage in William Faulkner. Like a latter day Deutero-Isaiah, Faulkner revisits that time in his region's history when it believed itself to be ascending to its apotheosis (his word), its high point of independence so that it could hang onto the peculiar evil of slavery without interference from others. On the threshold of secession, Faulkner says, thinking that they were about to take flight, they stood instead on the verge of the precipice (also his word), at the edge of an abyss. Faulkner says of this moment in the history of the South: "the first seconds of a fall always seem like soar[ing]."

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From Adam and Eve to today's news, this holds true. The prophet won't let the people forget. That's the nature of the comfort he brings. The prophet will not let the people forget what they lost in claiming their lives for themselves, while leaving the crumbs of ritual for God. It was the prophet's awful task to remind them they were not soaring when they fell.

"Comfort, comfort my people," says the Lord, "Speak comfortable words unto Jerusalem."

And in Isaiah's message of comfort, who should we see coming down that road cut through the wilderness, but another prophet on a distant horizon, whose words of comfort feel like burning healing salt in an old old wound. But that's another story.

Amen.