

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 6, 2020

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

“NOT SO FAR”

The Scripture

Isaiah 4:1-11

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.

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 cry?" 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.

The Message

Not So Far: Peace

Mark Briley



How are you doing with time and space these days? It is truly an interesting sociological phenomenon we're living through right now. We've all adjusted in different ways to the pandemic. For a time, introverts loved the freedom to refrain from social

interaction, and extroverts we're suffering the side effects of social deprecation. We've been in this season long enough now that even those waves have come and gone and... come again. At least for some. Some have been driven and focused... journaling and exercising beyond the norm, and others have zoned out in hopes of hibernating as much as possible through the corona storm. Some have bubbled well, and others have tried to pop the bubble as often as possible.

I saw this post from a friend in reference to how she's navigating socially right now. It was a simple dialogue with... herself. It reads like this:

Me: sometimes I talk to myself.

Me: OMG same.

Does that sound like you? Another admitted, "*When I say, "The other day," I could be referring to any time between yesterday and 15 years ago.*"

Time and space and engagement with humanity are all in a communal fog right now. How are you coping? In COVID or non-COVID times, most of us are pretty sensitive about our personal space, especially guarded from those who tend to grate on our nerves. Speaking of such a relationship, one person said, "*The sun is 91 million miles away; not too far, not too close. Be like that.*"

As a nation upended, restless in mind, body, and spirit, peace has not been a close companion in 2020. The prophet Isaiah cried out to God in such a time; crying for peace after such a long season of undue pain and division. Are we due for such a time of peace ourselves? Not so far, it seems. Could the Prince of Peace come through now? Is there something more for us to do? These are the questions we wrestle with God and each other this morning as we land in week two of our Advent sermon series, "*Not so Far.*" We pay close attention to peace today... is it near or far? Can we do something to bring the peace or is it totally out of our control?

If you're feeling a bit handcuffed by this isolation right now You may relate to the Israelites to whom the prophet Isaiah speaks in our passage of focus today. Isaiah's name means "*God Saves.*" It is one reason many have called this prophet's work, "*The Salvation Symphony.*" The symphony has three distinct movements that theologians most simply call Isaiah 1, 2, and 3. The first 39 chapters are Messages of Judgment. The next fifteen chapters are Messages of Comfort, and the last ten chapters of Messages of Hope. Our passage today opens Deutero Isaiah – or 2nd Isaiah, launching the messages of comfort. It's a call for the people to come home: cue Michael Bubl  Christmas special: "*I'll be home for Christmas... you can count on me.*" It's time. The exile has been long. The suffering has been much. The judgment full. And the message is shifting. But, because this is the first word of comfort after a long 39 chapters of judgment, Isaiah has some work to do to convince the people that comfort

is legit. They were used to the judgment. It's that experience you have when someone in your life has taken a 180 in attitude or stance or demeanor.

Your first thought is cautious – “*Who is this guy and what have you done with my crazy uncle, Isaiah?*” Isaiah had continually warned that things were not heading in a good direction and, sure enough, the people find themselves in Babylonian captivity. It was not their favorite season to say the least. The 2020 jokes were a plenty in that season, too. Worst year ever! There was chaos and uncertainty and certainly no peace... at least not so far.

We've tasted this reality this year. One step forward; two steps back. One thing looks promising and then all comes crashing down. It's like that great exchange between Frodo and Gandolph in *The Lord of the Rings*. The young Frodo says, “*I wish it need not have happened in my time.*” And the wise Gandalf replies, “*So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.*”

But it's hard to convince a people that the future is bright when all they encounter is darkness and cynicism and judgment. This passage from Isaiah turns the page. It's included in the standard Advent texts, because it speaks of clearing a path for a new way forward. John the Baptist picks up the words of the prophet in his work of paving the way for Jesus, which is another reason it pops up in Advent lectionaries. *Prepare ye the way of the Lord... they write it, they preach it, they later turn it into a musical (Godspell... if anyone is scoring at home).* And we... the church... need to be this voice now. We need to create a new pathway. We need to let go of pointing fingers of blame and move into a season of constructing a new way forward. This is today's message of the prophet. This is the gospel of Jesus. This is the word for our time as well: *dream the world better.*



Dream the world better is a phrase that caught my attention this week. It is the motto for Omaze¹ – an online global sweepstakes platform that raises money for various charities. It caught my attention as I saw Pope Francis leaning over the hood of a beautiful Lamborghini Huracan parked in front of the Vatican. He was signing it with a Sharpie, I suppose.

¹ Omaze.com

Seemingly so out of place, they baited me right into the Omaze rabbit hole. One of the top searches this picture instigated was, “*Does the Pope drive a Lamborghini?*” Oh, Internet. Where would we be without you?

What I discovered was that a Spanish Rental Car Agency bought the Pope-signed sports car for a mere \$960,797. Proceeds from the sale went toward the reconstruction effort of faith communities along the Nineveh Plain near the Tigris River in Iraq. Other Omaze auctioned items have included winning and customizing your own tiny home, having lunch with George Clooney, and having a selfie-photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz. For most items, you can buy entries from \$5 to \$5,000 and more... the more entries you buy, the greater your chance to win, of course. Since 2012, Omaze has raised over 130-million dollars for more than 350 charities that have provided homes for the homeless, planted trees in the Amazon Rainforest and provided clean water for communities in Kenya and elsewhere. All under the idea of “*Dream the world better.*”

Peace, it seems, doesn't come by a lack of action, but rather, peace comes when a willing people risk what it means to dream the world better. To get in such a mental, emotional, and spiritual state, we've got to get focused. A Broadway friend connected me this week to podcast episode of Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt. She coined the term – “*pandemic mind*”.² You can imagine what that might mean. Even as we've stayed put more than ever, the mind is running wild... it's over-active, filled with uncertainty and the worst kinds of what-ifs. We're constantly running the scenarios in our own minds about what is safe. What happens if we get it? What happens if they get it? What if I can't work? What if I must work? We get stagnant in these states and we give up on the best kind of what-if's: *Dreams*. What if we could dream the world better?

Rabbi Holtzblatt says we've got to quiet the mind. Intentional space for God must be made in the mind to receive inspiration and enlightenment from God. And you know what else she said? She noted that the Talmud... which means, in Hebrew, “*to teach*” and is the prized collection of Jewish oral law and commentaries on those traditions, suggests that “*Dreams are 1/60th of prophecy.*” You're part prophet, and you didn't even know it. She says that dreams are often the only time we've given our minds rest... a chance to receive... and we need to create more space for the intentional quieting of our minds. And when we do? We begin to dream the world better. Like any discipline, we must create a routine... a practice... a discipline... and let it begin to transform our reality. This is easier said than done. If we give over our pandemic mind to fearful what if's, it can be a hard habit to break.

Lawyer, writer, and Honorary Consul to the Republic of Uganda, Bob Goff, shares in his newest book, *Dream Big*,³ “*I grew up in Northern California and liked to hike in the Sierra Nevada Mountains with my dad. He would point to a log and tell me a cautionary tale about how rattlesnakes try to stay out of the sun by hiding under the logs.*”

² <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dealing-with-pandemic-mind/id1499413307?i=1000488469536>

³ *Dream Big* by Bob Goff. Thomas Nelson Publishing. 2020.

Evidently, the only way to not get bit was to stand on the top of the log and then make a big leap out beyond where the snake could reach your ankles with its fangs.” He goes on to share about the wisdom and curiosity of his dad and how this advice came from a caring place to keep his son safe. But then Bob says, “I’ve been hiking in the Sierras for four decades, and do you know how many rattlesnakes I’ve seen? Zero. And that’s rounding up. Even so, do you know what I do every time I get to a log? I step on top and leap as far away as I can, so I don’t get bit. I see a twig on the sidewalk downtown and leap a foot or two in case a baby snake is under it.” So much of our dream space is absorbed by what-if scenarios generally grounded in unsubstantiated fear. Goff says, “Fear boxes us in and will always try to talk us into settling for lesser things. If we let fear push us around, it won’t be long before we’re all fences and no horses. If you want to clear the path toward your ambitions, you need to figure out what you’re afraid of and why you’re afraid of it.”

Pinpointing our fears won’t make them disappear. Fears don’t really get fully conquered; they’re just understood and given less power. Peace Sunday is about quieting the mind, the soul, enough that we can put our fears in their proper place. We can begin to see that this pandemic, or the Israelites season of exile, is shifting to a new season... if even it lingers a while longer, it will open to a new chapter. And as it does, our peace of mind comes in the clarity that we’ve been dreaming the world better all along.

We’ve got a vision before us Broadway... it’s coming... and its one that dreams the world better. It’s not perfect and certainly has much room for questions and detours and expanding possibilities, but it is an invitation to live into better world instead of hunkering down, thinking exile is the *only* future, pandemic is the *only* future, *small spirit* is *all* that is available for us now.

Isaiah says, “*Make a way...*” John the Baptist says, “*Clear a path...*” and Jesus says, “*You can do even greater things than me.*” But here’s the thing. We seem to be thinking... and I know I’ve caught myself in this position at times... we seem to be thinking we just ride it out. We don’t know when it will end, but we’ll just hold on... wait... and Advent is the season of waiting after all so patience is a virtue in this way. But... the range of what it means to wait is vast. If we are not actively waiting, our spirits will atrophy, and we won’t be ready when the time comes to live out the better dream.

I was exchanging some texts with a buddy this last week which prompted the sharing of that famed word from Galatians 6:9:

“Do not grow weary in doing good, for in due season, we will reap a harvest if we don’t give up.”

My natural question is always – “*When is ‘due season’?*” and I always hear the echoes of every wise saint and dreamer and prophet that has gone ahead of us: “*When the season is due.*” And just when is the season due? “*In due season.*” The season coming to pass is not often within our control. What is ours to do? Not grow weary in doing good. Not give up. Make a pathway for the Lord to enter the equation. Quiet the mind enough that God might speak even 1/60th prophecy into our lives... and to trust that even that dreamy sliver can bring clarity and focus. Clarity and focus always mean that peace is not so far after all.

We have one of those mounted key rings that hold the keys to things we own with locks on them. Do you know what I’m talking about? Do you have one of those? We finally got one a number of years ago, because we’d inevitably come in the house, set down the car keys in some random place and then wonder where they are when go-time was five-minutes ago. So, this small, cheap, little mounted key-ring-holder holds all the keys. There are some keys on that mounted key ring that never get used. We don’t even know what they’re for anymore. And because that mounted key ring thingamajig couldn’t hold all the keys we own, there are a handful of others in a kitchen drawer... no clue. What are they for? *But...* can’t get rid of them... never know if we might need them. Never know when we’ll need to open the glove box of the car we owned four vehicles ago that has likely been reduced to scrap metal years ago. I don’t know.

What I *do* know is that we hang onto stuff... keys, spiritual baggage, emotional baggage, even safe stuff because we never know if we may need it again or what would happen if we got rid of it. Can peace come close this Christmas? Can the Prince of Peace close the gap, the distance, to reside not so far away? It’s time to get clear. It’s time to figure out which keys unlock the future that the prophet says is ours and shed the fear and weight of the rest.

Are you ready? Ready for peace? Peace is not an idle state or the absence of conflict. Peace is a prepared heart... a quieted mind... a dreamed-up prophet. Peace is the gift one discovers who has done all they can to prepare the way for the Lord.

May it be so.

Song of Response
“*Promise of Life in God’s Peace*”
Words and Music: Ed Varnum

1. Peace! Peace! When will there be peace?
It all seems so distant. There is no release
from division, derision, deception, disease.
Will this go without ending? O God, send your peace.

Refrain:

And the prophet cries out, "Comfort my people!
This is the word of the Lord."

Speak comfort from pulpits and onto the streets.
In the midst of the struggle, the prophet decrees
good news to all people: "God is coming to you
bringing promise of life in God's peace."

2. Prepare the way! Our God is with you!
Into your desert, a promise made new
of comfort through Jesus, of peace that is true.
Prepare the way for God's light to shine through.

Refrain:

And the prophet cries out, "Comfort my people!
This is the word of the Lord."

Speak comfort from pulpits and onto the streets.
In the midst of the struggle, the prophet decrees
good news to all people: "God is coming to you
bringing promise of life in God's peace."