

Earlier in the week I spent time with someone who has had a real run of terrible events in his life lately. He totaled a car, bought another car and hit a deer, totaling the second car. He had a fire in his kitchen and lost his job. As if all of that weren't enough, his dog died. By the grace of God, he is still managing to put a smile on his face, but we likened his condition to that of Job – the figure in Scripture whose name has become synonymous with trouble and loss of everything.

In today's reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (40:1-11), the prophet is addressing the people of Israel in exile. They, too, have lost everything. They have lost their homeland, their place of worship – the Temple in Jerusalem – and all that they once knew and loved. They are in danger of losing the memory of their religion and their culture as they have been dispersed intentionally by their Babylonian captives and incorporated into the new culture.

Isaiah<sup>1</sup> assures these people that there will be better times. This new prophet on the horizon has the audacity to say to them that the message he has heard from God is one of comfort. "Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term..." In other words, God is planning to bring the people of Israel out of their prison in Babylon. Interestingly, the words in this passage: "comfort, speak, declare" – are verbs that are in the plural form in Hebrew. Jewish scholars interpret this as meaning that God was speaking not only to the prophet but to angelic messengers. God was directing them to bring these words of comfort to the people in the midst of their misery.

What are the implications of this message in our present context? Remember the person I spoke about initially? The one who had suffered so much loss? What if I had said to him, "Well, you deserve it." Or what if I had said to him, "Now that you've told me how you're suffering, what's your point? Do you expect me to have compassion for you? What do you want me to do about it?" On the face of it, these words seem harsh and it seems unthinkable that someone would respond to the suffering of another with this callousness and disregard for their pain. But we're seeing it in our culture today, folks. There was a political event within the past few months where the conversation centered around health care. The case being discussed was about a person who had a medical emergency requiring hospitalization and surgery, but he had no health insurance. The speaker said, "What should we do...let the person die?" Someone in the audience yelled emphatically, "YES!!" I believe that the speaker's intent was to invoke the social conscience of the audience and to point out that the concerns about the provision of health care to our people are complex and difficult. The technique certainly backfired. What we saw vividly demonstrated was that, yes, in our time and in this place we have at least some in our culture who would turn to the innocently suffering person saying, "Too bad for you" and walking away.

This isn't an isolated situation. On Thursday I visited a young woman of my acquaintance who has had terrible medical problems – one illness after another, including three unrelated surgeries. Because of her health issues, she has lost her job. With the loss of her job, she has lost her health insurance. She is now in the hospital recovering from her fourth surgery this year, the second such surgery without benefit of insurance. She has nothing. She has lost everything and she will be in debt for years to come paying off her medical expenses.

It's not my intention to dwell on the challenges of our health care delivery system. I'm telling these stories to illustrate the point of this Scripture in our time. In the midst of loss, God asks us to speak comfort, to care, to be tender with one another.

The Letter to the Hebrews states that "...we have here no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." (Heb. 13:14) St. Augustine later referred to this city that is to come

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<sup>1</sup> Deutero-Isaiah is a second prophet whose works are included under the one heading of "The Book of the Prophet Isaiah" and who prophesied during the time of the Babylonian captivity.

(in his great work by the same name) as “The City of God.” We pray for its arrival each time we say in the Lord’s prayer: “Thy Kingdom come.” At this time, we are exiles in a kingdom ruled by darkness. Yet God calls us to bring good news, to have compassion for one another, to be God’s agents of Light especially in the midst of suffering. “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly.....” Make the way smooth.

In the Book of the Prophet Malachi God declares: “Behold, I am sending My messenger to clear the way before Me...” (Mal. 3:1) Many Jews alive at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry believed that John the Baptist was the one referred to by Malachi (whose very name means “my messenger”) about 500 years before Christ.

In OUR time, dear friends, the messengers of the Good News are you and me. We are the boots on the ground in the here and now, the messengers from God to a hurting and confused world. We are the ones appointed to bring comfort to the oppressed, to speak the word of God’s ever-present faithfulness even in the midst of trials and suffering.

That’s not easy. In some ways, it’s easier to sit in judgment of those who are suffering, to say they brought it on themselves. To say they don’t deserve our help. To put them in some imaginary category of “people whom God has abandoned.” This makes our lives easier on the surface of things. But God, who loves us beyond our wildest dreams, won’t let us get away with that kind of thinking.

So let us ask ourselves, where is God offering you and me opportunities to make the way straight for the coming of Christ into someone’s life? Where is God asking you and me to speak words of comfort to someone who is in the midst of suffering? Wait upon the Lord and he shall direct your paths. The Lord will show you and me how He wants us to be his messengers in our various environments. The Lord will speak words of comfort to us and make our paths straight. And when he does – I pray that we believe and follow.

Amen.