

## Road Construction Zone

Isaiah 40: 1-11; Mark 1: 1-8 ; 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent; Union Cong. UCC

Rev. Robin Raudabaugh

Nostalgia is a powerful thing in our culture. Looking back on the good old days. Tradition! Tradition! And ...this church. Our historic building. We even have an entire room dedicated to just our history. So many here can say they were baptized, confirmed and married in this church. Those were the good old days – the glory days! You don't have to look around very long to get a quite different picture of this congregation. Find a couple old directories – there's pages and pages of folk of all ages – and many, many young families with children. The sanctuary was filled – two services even. The Sunday School filled to bursting. A big active youth group. Multiple young parents with children groups.

As I speak reminding you of what we used to be – I can almost feel the waves of nostalgia creeping in – and for some that nostalgia begins quickly sliding in to a bit of despair and sadness. This sanctuary while comfortably filled is now seldom packed to capacity unless someone notable dies. Our Sunday's Cool has many fewer families and children.

It's a feeling of loss. Many of us know that feeling – in places other than church. In our hometowns – they don't look like they used to – with mom and pop stores – kids allowed to play in the streets. Now – chain stores predominate at the malls and mini malls - and almost no one allows children to play anywhere but in designated playgrounds – if you can even pull them from their cell phones and rooms.

In our country. I've heard many of you speak in voices filled with pain at the loss of the country you loved. Where generosity and goodwill – compassion and care – at least seemed to prevail instead of the divisive fragmentation, isolationism, sexual misconduct, overt racism, and flagrant abuse of power.

Mark 1 lifts verses 2 and 3 from Isaiah 40, a passage of hope written in the midst of despair. This section of Isaiah was written at a time when most of the Israelites, had been sent off to captivity in Babylon.

Their homeland was no more; foreign armies had destroyed it – leveling houses and cities, razing fields and forests. The Israelites were now in a strange land to serve their conquerors. It was not the best of times. Many thought it was the worst of times.

And out of nowhere comes the prophet Isaiah – calling ‘Comfort, comfort, my people.’ Calling out that God has not forgotten God’s people and God will comfort those people. The prophet shouts that God is in the midst of a massive road construction project – leveling mountains, filling in valleys, building roads and bridges. God is on the loose. God has not forgotten God’s people – even though for the most part – God’s people had forgotten God – at least until all hell broke loose.

How much do you enjoy road construction season? How often, while maneuvering your clean white car through detours of muck and gravel, do you comment with gratitude and happiness about the nature of graders and dozers and levelers and dust and concrete and detours? Not so often? You don’t much like road construction season? Well neither did the Israelites.

When they heard Isaiah proclaiming that road construction season was coming – they were not impressed. Off in Babylon – hearing that only more chaos was in order before a new normal might be reached was not the immediate good news we often perceive it to have been.

Comfort, comfort my people - And the people cried – but we don’t know how to live in this new place! Our temple is gone. The food is strange. The people are stranger. Everything smells different. My daughter is dating a pagan. There is no place to feel at home here. I’m a stranger in a strange land. I am way, way out of my comfort zone.

And yet, I am reminded once again that this situation was so much worse than our privileged discomfort and frustration with road construction season. To get a better idea of the Israelite’s dire predicament, think of the ways in which Native American people in our own country have been historically and continue to be treated in our own time.

They have been victims of a calculated attempt to destroy their own respective cultures and religion for the purpose of assimilation. So it was for Israel. Think of African slaves forced to deny their own religion and practice the religion of their enslavers.

God responds to conditions such as these by bringing forth a prophetic voice. God wants comfort for God's people who are so far out of their comfort zone they don't even know where to begin.

God calls for this people, 'Comfort, comfort,' and Isaiah reminds God's people that they will learn to find their comfort in new places – in new ways. They will try new foods and learn to like them. They will welcome a son-in-law of another faith tradition – or no faith tradition – into their family. They will learn a new language. Learn new ways and places to pray and worship. They will learn how to keep what really matters and let go of the rest – they will continue to embrace a Still Speaking God - knowing that God has not abandoned them - that hope is on the way.

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Advent is all about hope. Not just about waiting. It's about waiting with expectation – about the planning and preparing and getting ready kind of waiting. O Come, O Come Emmanuel is a cry for salvation, a pleading for God to come to save us. It's a belief that we can rejoice now because liberation is just around the corner.

And yet, we keep wanting to look at how things used to be, the good old days, and we really wonder if it might not be true that God has finally given up on us and left us.

We do like to cast ourselves – especially at this time of year – with the shepherds who hear the chorus of angels broadcasting the startling news of God's coming. And we surely we do need to hear those words of comfort again – to be reassured that God is with us – and will always be.

These words of comfort – however, are not just for us – to savor like special foods at a holiday feast. These words are for all God's beloved – and many of those beloved of God ones are not gathered at the same feast tables as we are.

“What shall I cry?” asks Isaiah – trying hard to understand how to formulate the message that God intends – so that God’s people might finally understand.

The message is preposterous. And yet isn’t this exactly the message we are being commissioned to carry out – to live into? In the face of indifference and greed and hate – aren’t we called to speak on behalf of this fierce God whose compassion and care are for all humankind – and for creation itself? And doesn’t this message of love and care trump the power of all other messages of destruction and oppression and violence and hatred and exclusion?

Isaiah and Mark remind us that once again God is doing a brand new thing. God is in full road construction season – bringing down mountains, lifting up valleys, leveling highways. God has never left God’s people who have wandered off on this or that detour. God is always there and always faithful.

Advent is a time to hear the promises spoken or sung to remind the community of faithful once again of God’s promised presence with us. It is also a time for our community of faith to find our own voice – to overcome objections, to speak words of comfort to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God – remind them – us - that God will arrive and – and it will be with gentle, tender power.