

The Comfort We Proclaim
Isaiah 40.1-11 and Mark 1.1-8
Second Sunday of Advent, Year B
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

You know the big number from *Mame*. The stock market has crashed, Mame has lost her fortune, and she breaks into song after deciding that decorating early for Christmas will cheer up her household.

Haul out the holly
Put up the tree before my spirit falls again
Fill up the stocking
We may be rushing things, but deck the halls again now

For we need a little Christmas
Right this very minute
Candles in the window
Carols at the spinet

For we need a little music
Need a little laughter
Need a little singing
Ringing in the rafters
And we need a little something
Happy ever after
We need a little Christmas now

First performed in 1966, the lyrics originally said, "But Auntie Mame, it's one week past Thanksgiving now!" Meaning it's too early to decorate. As the holiday season has emerged, the line now reads, "It's one week from Thanksgiving Day now!" But even that is no longer completely ridiculous. I know two pastors who put up their Christmas decorations in early November in advance of Thanksgiving because of the same sentiment: *Put up the tree before my spirit falls again*. But the season of Advent is decidedly slow and is not designed to distract us or even to satisfy us. This is a time of preparation, of waiting together, in darkness.

On Wednesday night, a small group of us gathered in the chapel sang together, prayed together, then reflected on darkness together. I shared writings on what it means to sit in darkness and wait for light to slowly emerge: one candle last week, today two. I

shared that I, like so many of you, have felt I cannot process any more tragic news from our country and our world. I, too, want lights, candles, and carols. In our most honest moments, we admit we want to push through darkness or eradicate it once and for all.

It was also on Wednesday that a grand jury in New York decided not to prosecute the officer responsible for the death of Eric Garner. I will admit that before Wednesday, I only knew the Eric Garner story as yet another tragic headline. I wasn't seeking out more information because the weight of it all seems too much to bear. After all, what do you do with that information once you're holding the weight of it?

And so I confess to you this morning my sin of comfort seeking. I want to be comfortable. When I hear a story and let it pass through my brain without moving into my life and words and actions, I am chasing comfort. I confess I want to make hot chocolate and sit beside the Christmas tree and listen to a steady stream of holiday music. I confess I have bought into the cultural lie of the 20th century that Christmas is a month-long retail season of shopping, preparing, wrapping, and pretending.

Today I call myself to action. With the words of the prophet Isaiah before us, I call any of us who are tuning the news out as we turn our holidays up: God's word of comfort is not about being comfortable.

In the Huffington Post this week, the Rev. John H. Vaughn of Auburn Theological Seminary shared his response to the swirling combination of race, police force, societal response by writing, "Maybe if I close my eyes, it will just go away...Closing my eyes would be so easy, but to do so would only put me and my family at great peril. God comes to us saying 'Do not be afraid for I am with you.'"¹

Maybe if I close my eyes, it will just go away.

Maybe if I just keep my head down, eyes averted, and add more decorations around my house, this will all blow over by January.

Maybe if our pastor doesn't bring it up during the middle of Advent worship, I don't have to feel the weight of the brokenness in my nation.

I will also confess: I don't want to be John the Baptist. I don't want to be the socially bizarre prophet at the edge of town with the scary message. I want to be accepted, welcomed, sometimes wholly unnoticed.

¹ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-john-vaughn/if-i-close-my-eyes-maybe- b 6268768.html>

But when my third grade son looks at me before he goes to bed and asks, “Who was Michael Brown? And why did the police officer shoot him? And why is the police officer not in jail? Is it because he’s white?” When he questions the safety of his friends with brown skin and realizes the protection his own skin color affords. When I see the images and the video and the hashtags: Hands Up Don’t Shoot, I Can’t Breathe and Black Lives Matter...Well, then my own comfort doesn't seem to matter quite so much anymore. My own desire to be accepted, and welcomed, and praised and the simultaneous hesitation to say anything that may rock the boat is just another symptom of my unbelievable privilege. And that isn’t at all what God is talking about in Isaiah 40. And that isn’t at all why the Markan Gospel writer would reference that pivotal, prophetic text.

Comfort comes as a word during great turmoil to oppressed people whom God loves. In the context of Isaiah 40, this is a word to an exiled Israel who has lost home and temple and fears they have lost God. They feared God was punishing them, feared God wasn’t as strong or as real as they’d once believed, they feared they were alone in the world.

To them, God spoke: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid”

The prophet promised: all things as you know it will be changed by God’s words. “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. ⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

And God’s comfort will be real: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom”

When you feel you have been cast far from God, when you feel you have lost everything, when the powers of empire are against you and possessing you and preventing you from living into the fullness of the life God created for you, then God breathes—even we we cannot—COMFORT MY PEOPLE.

This passage reappears in Mark 1. If you still have your Bibles open to this passage, flip through the next 2-3 pages. There’s no birth narrative in Mark. No angels and shepherds and manger. There’s just John the Baptist in his camel hair with a powerful

message at the edge of town. "Someone is coming...things are going to change forever...prepare for this...get yourselves ready."

This message also comes to a people oppressed by an empire. For Isaiah 40 it was the Babylonians. For Mark 1 it was the Romans. If the word of anticipation and comfort comes to the oppressed in scripture, we must ask: who is this word for today? How do we hear the national news of the past week as we listen to the words of Isaiah?

God knows you and I need promise of God's comfort and peace, but is this word really about soothing a largely middle class, predominantly white, already-more-comfortable-than-most-of-the-world congregation?

You see, there is a danger in proclaiming the comfort of God. When we breathe these words in scripture and hold them for ourselves as comforting our mostly comfortable lives, we are not honoring the intention of the text. When we affirm these texts as sacred messages of God's love and protection for all people, especially for those people who have the least power in our society and our world, we must honestly ask: What is required by our proclamation?

There is a danger in getting this wrong and claiming God's words for ourselves but not for the ones who most need it. There is also a danger in accepting these words as true for all people because we are accepting the call to preparation that John the Baptist proclaimed. Once we believe it and say it out loud, we must do something.

Last week Karoline Lewis offered this reflection on Isaiah 40, "Jesus enters into the entirety of our humanness, our sin. But by sin, however, I do not mean our so-called personal depravity, unworthiness, questionable morality, etc. I get weary of those assumptions about and definitions of sin. Rather, Jesus enters into the powers that perpetuate sin, the nations that nurture sin, and the structures that situate sin as justifiable. He comes to take them on by telling the truth and being the truth -- the truth that names our own compliance, our own conformity, our own acquiescence to the kind of sin that tolerates inequity, that believes we have 'gotten past' the -isms that exclude and excuse, that insists on the protection of institutional ideologies thereby rationalizing acts of dehumanization."²

St. Charles, we must confess our sin to each other. We must tell the truth: that we often hope to close our eyes and wait for sad and scary news to go away. That we want

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3446>

personal comfort and not prophetic calling. That we want to distance ourselves from controversy and violence.

We must admit to each other that we do not fully understand the complexities of race, power, and privilege. We must stop assuming we have all the answers and start asking better questions. Then we must close our mouths as we listen, deeply listen, to the stories of those who have been oppressed by power. No judgment. No commentary. Just good questions and even better listening.

If we take seriously the call to carry God's peace into the world, then we commit ourselves to being proclaimers of God's comforting words through the ways we act. This is not just my job. This peace and comfort proclamation is the calling of this entire congregation. For if it is in God's nature and in Christ's name that we seek to live, then it must also be in God's way that we move and love and pray.

How then shall we move?

Next Saturday, December 13, there will be a march in Washington, D.C. in response to the Michael Brown and Eric Garner stories. The march will be attended by representatives from our denominational partners at the Alliance of Baptists and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. All are welcome to attend, but a trip to D.C. in the next six days is not realistic for most of us some 1100 miles away.

How else do we proclaim comfort in response to the cries of oppression in our country? Our partners at the Alliance suggest two things:

- 1) Embody the meaning of "sanctuary" by cultivating spaces where persons can gather to lament the unjust loss of African-American lives and to liturgically enact our restless expectation for an in-breaking justice that is still yet-to-come.

- 2) Embody congregational commitments to racial justice through intentional, ongoing racial justice education and activism training that takes place throughout the year, and not only in moments of national crisis.

For today's worship I add a third.

- 3) Today we are renewed in our participation of the communion meal. This meal is a ritual of remembering as well as a call to action. We remember Christ's body, broken. We remember Christ's blood, poured out. We remember his words and actions, and we commit ourselves to live in his Way. This meal also binds us together as a people. We enact this meal together, not individually. We are renewed, reminded, and called

together to pray and live and love in the way of Christ Jesus. With our questions and imperfections and brokenness and grief and anger and fear in our hands, we receive the bread and the cup. May we give ourselves to this meal today as we receive and proclaim God's comfort for all people. Amen.