

“THE GIFT OF COMFORT”

Isaiah 49:14-18

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Advent marks the beginning of a new church year, but it closes out the calendar year. We are looking forward to celebrating the birth of the Christ child, but there may be almost as much joy in saying goodbye to the troubling twenty-twenty. Our hope is in the coming of Emmanuel, God-with-us, but there is also a lot of hope in the coming vaccine. We don't consciously hold these joys and hopes together, and in the Advent-Christmas seasons, we certainly focus our thoughts and feelings on the sacred story. But over the course of the year we do, almost reflexively, associate the desires of faith with the blessings of life.

For the puritans, or pilgrims as we refer to them in our history, it was an article of faith that the successful life indicated God's approval. Preachers of the prosperity gospel today have made use of many scriptures that suggest that God will send material blessings to the faithful Christian. Jesus' parable of the talents where those who double their talents are given even more than the one who hides his is a favorite. The book of proverbs offers many short sayings that suggest that the wise will be blessed. Of course, one becomes a little suspicious of today's preachers when they define the faithful as those who send them money.

In my mind, the basic fallacy in their approach is the almost exclusive association of blessing with financial gain. It's as if they've forgotten everything Jesus said about money. "No can serve two masters... Blessed are the poor... Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor and then, come and follow me." For Jesus, money is more an impediment to faith than an indication of faithfulness.

Even so, Jesus was very much about bringing life and faith together. He believed that faith practiced would bring real world blessings. "The kingdom of God is at hand," he said. He inherited this understanding from his Jewish faith. Judaism was always a faith for this world. Belief in an afterlife or in the resurrection had become the dominant view in Jesus' day but there were still many who rejected these ideas. And even though Jesus clearly believed in resurrection, his emphasis was on a faith for this life in this world.

This is why Zion claims in today's text, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." They have been taken from their homes to Babylon and placed in internment camps. Most will have lost some family members in the war or been separated from loved ones in the flight from Babylon's armies. They may have witnessed the destruction of their temple and the tearing down of Jerusalem's walls. Some will have been raped. When you hold together faith and life, what else could you say but that God had abandoned you? What else could you believe but that God was punishing you because you had not been faithful?

When I read this text, my first thought was that this does not describe me. I do not feel forsaken. In a year when a pandemic has taken hold of the world bringing death to many,

separating even more, and exacerbating existing divisions; I do not feel abandoned by God. There are days when I feel worn down. I expect that it will have been a full year before we gather together to worship again. I miss the visits, the fellowship events. It saddens me that some of you have buried loved ones without the benefit of your faith community's presence. But I don't feel abandoned.

I feel and I hope you feel also that God has been feeding you during this time like "the woman who remembers her nursing child. I sense that God has been holding me and this faith community in the palms of his hands.

I know that part of the reason I feel this way is because on some level I am comfortable. I have a job that allows me to work at home, and a community of faith that appreciates the adjustments I make to continue doing ministry. I have a home to shelter in with a companion I love being around. I am spending less money, making the bills easier to pay than ever before.

When I think about where I am in this text, I am not in the sense of abandonment, but embraced by the comfort God offers. Even in this challenging time I can see life and faith holding together, I feel the blessings of God. But faith can't remain faith if it stops here. Faith has to look at Zion. Faith has to look at those who feel forgotten. Faith receives comfort, but it can't remain comfortable.

The gift of comfort cannot be possessed or held onto for oneself. Embedded in comfort, embedded in God's response to Zion, is compassion. Compassion despises idleness. It says, "If I'm not needing it, I better be giving it. If I'm not feeling forsaken, I should be turning my attention to those who do. Jan Richardson writes in *This Luminous Darkness*, "And though [comfort] is deeply personal, it is not merely that; solace does not leave us to our own solitude. True comfort opens our broken heart toward the broken heart of the world and, in that opening, illuminates a doorway, a threshold, a connection. It reveals to us a place where, in the company of heaven and earth, we can begin anew, bearing forth the solace we have found" (p.5).

This is what you have been doing for each other, forging new connections in new ways in a world where the old ways aren't currently working. You are exercising the gift of comfort. This was what God was doing in sending Jesus: connecting heaven with earth, faith with life, forging a new kind of relationship, and bringing comfort to a troubled world.

This is what health care workers have been doing for nearly a year now, offering not just medical care to those isolated from loved ones in hospitals, but sometimes the only comfort the patient will receive. This is what those putting in hours upon hours to develop a vaccine are doing too.

So where are you in this text? Do you feel forgotten by God? This Advent, know that God cannot forget you, nor do we, the community of faith. Maybe you are firm in your faith and know that God remembers you. Don't get too comfortable in that knowledge, but let it move you to find words of comfort and acts of compassion to the forgotten and forsaken of this world. Few things are so rewarding and so needed as the gift of comfort. Amen.