

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

Advent II

By Eric Howell

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Sometimes I don't feel like listening to Christmas music, even after Thanksgiving. As the days in December roll on I warm up to it a little bit, but I don't seek the 24-hour Christmas station on the radio when I jump in the car. My wife on the other hand loves the stuff. She'd start listening to it in October if the rest of us would let her. She can't get enough of it. *Hark the Herald. Rudolph. Silent Night. Frosty. O Little Town of Bethlehem. Grandma got Run Over by a Reindeer.* It doesn't matter. She'd listen to it all—Handel's *Messiah*, Bing Crosby, the Chipmunks. So I feel like a Scrooge and eventually I come around and get in the spirit of things. No big deal. But midnight on Christmas night and it's done. No more. Time to put the Christmas CDs back in the attic until next Thanksgiving. On to other music. Back to U2, Willie and Waylon, David Wilcox, James Taylor, and Coldplay. Actually, let's be honest. We have two kids. It's back to Jack Johnson, Music Machine, and Veggie Tales.

What if there were no music to hear and no song to sing—ever. There's a poem in the Bible about the day the music died. It's the darkest, loneliest, most desperate psalm in the Bible: 137. Most of us even wonder why it's in here at all, it's so dark. There's a line at the end about tormenting the babies of the enemies. It's dark stuff. It's not meant to be instructive about what you should pray. It's an example of what people sometimes do pray when they pray from the darkest depths of desperate hearts. If there's a lesson to be learned it is that anything can be taken to God, even this.

“By the waters of Babylon there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”

Israel is in the darkest days of their exile and captivity by the Babylonians, centuries after their glory days under King David. Centuries before Jesus. Their painful memories of the way life was supposed to be under God's protection are punctuated and mocked by their captors—“Sing! Sing a song. Sing it loud, all day long!” “How can we sing songs about God out here?” Their exile was the final step in their demise as a people. There had been warning signs. In Isaiah 39, they are told something like this is going to happen. But no one listened. And so beginning with the theologically disastrous reign of Manasseh, the people descended in a downward spiral of faithlessness, pride, arrogance, idol worship, sin and consequences. For a brief time good King Josiah the reformer gave them hope. But his inexplicable death was the ultimate example of something bad happening to someone good and buried them deeper in existential and national agony. The rise of Babylon as a regional superpower heightened tensions until Babylon came and razed Jerusalem, burned it to the ground, tore down its walls and temple, and carried her people off into the wilderness of their souls, their worship, their identity. The emergence of Babylon as a world power and threat. The inexplicable death of good king Josiah. The Destruction of Jerusalem, razing of the city, burning of the temple, termination of the dynasty, and most devastatingly, the deportation to Babylon.

They were lost.

So this darkest psalm expresses the frustration, resentment, sadness of people in exile. Babylon comes to represent all of that in life that takes us from who we are meant to be. The experience of Babylon was a real and painful experience for the Jews. Centuries later, long after the actual empire of Babylon was fading into history, John and others would rename Rome Babylon. Babylon is the system. It is the displacement we may feel. Babylon is anything that is bigger than we are and is not of God. It is the now unbreakable habit that started out as just toying with sin. It's the relationship of co-dependence from which you can't seem to break free. It's the system . . .

This psalm expresses the pain many of us feel at times in our lives when we feel lost and alone. We might use different words but the feeling is the same despair and hopelessness. This seems out of tune with the happiness we are supposed to feel as Christians, especially at Christmas. But that only adds guilt to accentuate the pain that many people quietly suffer through this time of year and any time of year. And what makes it worse is when God is silent.

In our house we put our kids in time-out when it's necessary. The great pain of time-out is the silence. They have to be quiet, but the pain is the silence from parents.

For over 150 years the people heard nothing from God. For over 150 years, this great sense of silence from God and isolation. There's a book in the Old Testament during this time called appropriately Lamentations. The Laments. It's depressing reading, but you know, when you are feeling the blues, you have to sing the blues.

1.2 The city is like a widow who weeps with tears on her cheeks. She has none to comfort her.

1.9 She has fallen terribly. She has no comforter.

1.17 She reaches out her hands. There is no one to comfort her.

1.21 They heard my groaning, yet there is no one to comfort me.

Silence. Then the silence is broken. "Comfort, comfort my people." God's own voice breaks the despair of Judah and power of Babylon; it penetrates the emptiness of exile and fills the world with possibilities: "Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her warfare is over."

God pierces the silence. Your time-out is over. It's time to come home. Every valley you face and every low place in you shall be lifted up; every mountain in your way and every obstacle within you brought low. The rough places you may face and the uneven places in your heart will be made straight. It's time to go home. You are free. Frederick Buechner once said, "No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home that beckons us."

In the intimate, relational language of the covenant, "Comfort, comfort my people says your God." God has not forgotten you. It's over. The hard times are behind you. The long

struggle is ended. The iniquity is pardoned. The sin has been paid for. It's done. So prepare the way. God is coming.

All four gospels put these words on the lips of John the Baptist at the coming of Jesus. There's not much exactly in common in all four gospels. Only two miracles—the feeding of the five thousand and the Resurrection. But this announcement is in all four. Mark's gospel even opens with these words. Announcing them like a trumpet blast: "In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord."

Imagine how the first hearers in the first century, burdened with a yoke of servitude to Rome would have heard these words invoked from the past. "Comfort, comfort." John the Baptizer, standing at the Jordan river, out in the wilderness itself, recalls the words once used to set God's people free, now invoking that same message for the redemption for all of humanity from exile and captivity: "Prepare the way of the Lord".

"Comfort, comfort." This week I listened to at least a half dozen versions of this part of Handel's *Messiah*. Interesting that each one was different. Some were heavy-handed. "Comfort, comfort" was sort of a command: Be Comforted.

Another was a bold announcement of this news: Comfort!

Even, believe it or not, a cheesy 1989 pop-rock trio version of it complete with synthesizer music and electronic lights on the stage and gyrating singers.

Maybe there are different versions because we hear the message differently today. For someone, "Be comforted; Prepare the way" is a sort of command to follow, but you don't really feel it. You listen and follow because you try to do the right thing, but it's not really hitting your soul today.

For someone else, "Comfort!" is an announcement of exceedingly good news that hope is possible. Maybe no one else here this morning knows what you are going through, but because of God's promise you can cling to hope like it's your fingertips in the last handholds on the cliff.

Maybe the cheesy, pop-synthesized one is for you. I can't really figure out why, so I'll just let you enjoy the moment without trying to analyze you.

The one that touches me, and may touch you this morning at this moment in your life, is the one that is like a gentle hand on your shoulder. "Comfort, comfort my people, saith your God." Hearing this version is as if it is a message meant just for someone for whose heart is especially tender today. This has been a hard year for you and today you just need to sit and let these words embrace you. It's good news, but not shout-from-the-mountaintop news just yet. It's "Could this possibly be good news?"—like you want to believe it, but you've been around the block enough, you've been in exile long enough. You just aren't sure you are ready yet to get your harp out of the tree and tune it up again. After everything you've been through, how can you sing the Lord's song again?

The people God is referring to when God says, "my people" may surprise you. Not just holy people who have it all together.

The message of this text and the message of the season is directed to people who know themselves to be exiles, people who are not at home in the systems they are living in, people who haven't bought into all of this, but are longing for the new Day of God. These are sometimes broken, faithless, sad, disenchanting people who are in all sorts of ways broken in body, mind, and spirit. It's for people whose harps and hopes are hanging up in the trees.

The promise and hope of the gospel is that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, has not ever, does not, will not ever—whatever darkness you may experience—loneliness, silence, sadness—the light has come into the world and the darkness will not overcome it. Maybe this light is just enough that, along with the harkened herald angels, you'll be able to sing, “Glory to the newborn King, peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled! Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies; with the angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem.’ ‘Glory to the newborn king.’”

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