

6 December 2020 Advent 2B Isaiah 40.1-11 Mark 1.1-8 Dean Susanna

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah 40:1
and we need that, don't we, after this tough year, comfort.

In 2004, after I completed my diploma in remedial massage, I worked as a message therapist. For me, massage is or can be comfort, healing prayer. As a massage therapist, I always prayed for my clients and I saw myself as a channel, a conduit for God's healing power, God's light.

Last week's Advent symbol was the cracked pot. The cracks filled with gold through which the light could shine.

Our advent symbol today is two outstretched hands holding the light. They could be the hands of a masseur. They could be your hands. They could be Christ's.

In her dying days, two things my mother appreciated most were hearing the harp played for her and experiencing a hand massage. She also enjoyed the camaraderie and tough gentle touch of a wards-men who turned her over, and showed her a photo of his beloved motorbike in the lounge room.

'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God', we hear from the prophet Isaiah. Comfort, means literally, with-strength. To comfort is to lend our strength to another¹. It doesn't mean carrying them, but leaning in, supporting, lending strength.

We are invited to receive that comfort, to lean in and be matched with God's strength.

There is a song in our threshold choir repertoire which says 'lean in and let it go.'

The threshold choir sings to people in transition, people who are dying. The prophet speaks 'comfort, comfort my people.'

'Lean in and let it go' and the invitation for us is also to invite others to lean in, to find comfort in our words and actions as we channel God strength, God's love.

'Lean in and let it go'

Advent is about waiting, yes, but it's also about getting ready, preparing, making the paths straight carving out a way that enables ourselves and others to receive God's presence, God's way.

¹ https://liturgy.slu.edu/2AdvB120620/reflections_stump.html

It is about removing the obstacles to listening to God and experiencing God with us.. internal and external..

In massage, I work with people's muscles and sometimes exert great pressure to release a muscle at a trigger-point. I also smooth and soothe and work with. Sometimes I stretch the muscles and invite people to resist, then stretch them further until they release that tension and become relaxed.

Jesus did not only speak, he touched.. laying hands on children and blessing, spitting and making a mud pack to heal sight, and healing unclean lepers, touching and healing one whose ear was cut off... Not to mention being touched himself by women who anointed and massaged his feet or his head.

In the gospel, we are hear of a wild man with an eremitical Spirit, John the Baptist. A serious man who is inviting his followers in the words of the prophet Isaiah, to prepare, to make ready for the imminent arrival of this Jesus.

How does God bring comfort in this time? How do we prepare?

I suspect each person's way is different, but for me, it is continuing my spiritual practices of prayer and reading the Scriptures, walking each morning, and finding moments of rest in the day, and listening to the voice of Spirit in our world. It is not an accident that Spirit is called 'comforter'.

What are your spiritual practices that enable you to lean in to God, to gain the comfort that you need to clear a path for the light of Christ to shine through you?

Through word, Through images, through touch and through taste and through a felt sense.

When I was in Canberra last week visiting my dad, my sister gave me a voucher to have a massage. I've been missing having a massage, that physical healing touch. The massage was heavenly. It was comforting and grounding and opening. It was an answer to prayer and an experience of grace, of comfort, of strengthening. That massage changed me and put me back on track, that and visiting my dad. God works in mysterious ways.

We can receive this comfort, this strengthening while we wait. And waiting, as we know, is not a passive thing. It is active.

For me, it involves continuing with the practices that open me to the light shining through, specifically, at this time of year, reading the advent Scriptures and preparing liturgies and symbols for each week in the lead up to Christmas. I don't do this alone. I share this waiting, this preparation with others to bring the fruit of their prayer and action to this work.

Some of this waiting is also to bring comfort to others. To visit those who are sick and those in residential care, and those preparing to get married, and those preparing to leave this life, and those who grieve, to advocate for those in need, to stand alongside, to lend strength.

Jan Richardson:

In some sense we are all creating the road as we go. Yet beneath this, undergirding this, is a path carved by those who have traveled here before us, who followed the God who called them to the journey, who gave themselves to preparing a way for the One who came into the world to walk with us.

What path are you traveling in this Advent season? ..

Who has helped to fashion the path and has provided inspiration to walk it in your own manner?

How might you prepare the way—and become part of the way—for the Christ who comes to us?²

It may be tempting to think that we should prepare ourselves more strenuously to encounter and welcome Christ than to meet anyone else. This season, however, beckons us to remember that the incarnation takes place anew each day, and that Christ comes in the form of those whom we meet on our path.³

Blessing the Way

With every step
you take,
this blessing rises up
to meet you.
It has been waiting
long ages for you.
Look close
and you can see
the layers of it,
how it has been fashioned

² <http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/01/advent-2-blessing-the-way/>

³ <http://adventdoor.com/2009/12/02/advent-2-the-mystery-of-approach/>

by those who walked
this road before you,
how it has been created
of nothing but
their determination
and their dreaming,
how it has taken
its form
from an ancient hope
that drew them forward
and made a way for them
when no way could be
seen.

Look closer
and you will see
this blessing
is not finished,
that you are part
of the path
it is preparing,
that you are how
this blessing means
to be a voice
within the wilderness
and a welcome
for the way.

—Jan Richardson⁴

John the Baptist challenges us to get rid of excess baggage, focus on what's essential, and get moving on the road God is preparing for us.

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God...He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

Susanna

⁴ <http://adventdoor.com/2011/12/01/advent-2-blessing-the-way/>