

Sermon – December 8, 2019

“Comforted in Peace”

Text: Isaiah 40: 1-11

This year marks the 71st year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948. In its preamble and in Article 1, the Declaration proclaims the inherent rights of all human beings: “Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of humankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...All human beings – *women and men* - are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Violation of human rights was very much present in the Bible including the book of Isaiah. About six hundred years before Jesus was born, the poet known as Second Isaiah, believed to have written Chapters 40-55, captured the atrocities and human rights violations perpetrated by foreign invaders when the Israelites were exiled in Babylon. The defeated people were taken as prisoners and slaves who include not only men but also women and children. Most of them came from affluent families, the elite of the society, the intellectuals and the noble and carried them off to a foreign land. Their homeland has been taken over by the colonizers and their temple has been destroyed.

Isaiah 40 begins with these powerful words: “Comfort, O comfort my people”. To comfort means “to soothe, console, or reassure.” The Hebrew verb *nachamu* translated as “comfort” literally means, “to cause to breathe again.” In other words, Second Isaiah the writer portrays God speaking to the exiled people who were about to come home, “You can breathe easy again.” These words of comfort were directed not only to those in exile but also to all of us right now, because there are many of us, like our ancestors of faith, who were taken away into exile by the circumstances in our lives and places where we don’t want to be. Perhaps you are in exile right now and what you need most of all is... comfort. This reminds me of a story of a little girl came home from a neighbour's house where her best friend had died. "Why did you go?" questioned her father. "To comfort her mother," said the child. "What could you do to comfort her?" "I climbed into her lap and cried with her."

The reality is that when people suffer and need comfort but receives none, they often begin to feel a deep sense of isolation and abandonment, and then resorts to other things that may harm them instead of comfort them. Like the ancient Israelites, from time to time, we long to hear words of comfort. We want someone to console us, embrace us, heal us, and take us home. Imagine the darkest places of your life; the fear, the anger, the pain, the hurt. Wondering when, or whether, it will end. You carry guilt and regret like a worn-out suitcase wherever you go. The days are filled with “should haves” and the nights with “if only.” Over and over you see your life replayed to the point that you can see no future - only moments of exile, of alienation, of wilderness.

At the lectionary group this past Tuesday, I asked the question, what does comfort look like to you? Susan Young said, a home where we can find security and comfort. This reminded me of a story. As the people arrived for church in a small town one Sunday morning, they were met by a rather disturbing sight. A homeless beggar sat on the front steps of the church building, wearing tattered clothing, a wool cap pulled down over his eyes, and clutching a bottle in fingerless gloves. They had never seen anything quite like this greeting them as they get into the church entrance.

Most worshipers simply walked around the man, or ignored him, as he sat there. Some muttered words of disapproval, and others suggested that the man move to another doorway before the Sunday school children arrived. One member told the man, that the Salvation Army was a more appropriate place to sleep in. At one point, a kind woman brought the man a cup of hot coffee, but not one person asked the man to come in out of the cold, and certainly nobody invited him in to join them in worship.

Imagine, then, the people’s surprise during the opening hymn, when the homeless beggar made his way into the pulpit and took off his cap. The people recognized that it was their pastor! The pastor began his remarks that morning in this way: “I didn’t do this to embarrass you or to poke you in the eye. I did it to remind us that this is a human being that God loves, and God has called us to love him, too.”

Homelessness certainly is an issue of concern not only here in Ottawa but in many parts of the world. The idea of being homeless never crosses our minds, until we see that person living in a cardboard box, or that family living in a trailer, or those people sleeping under an overpass or

outside a building. I don't know if you have noticed a homeless man living in his grey car on the corner of Moodie and West Hunt Club since this past summer? He was once a topic of conversation in the Bells Corners Rocks facebook group. Many residents including police officers and the construction workers approached him to offer help but he declined each offer. Apparently, he had some "bad luck" he said and doesn't need help. He is another face of homelessness. What about those group of Ottawa residents, about 20 of them, who lost their homes due to a fire in April this year, and are now living together in a camp near the Bayview LRT station? These homeless campers became a community. They have meals together and look out for each other for emotional support and safety. These campers are homeless and found home with each other. If you drive through the low-income areas of our community, the lack of affordable housing becomes apparent.

What can we do as a faith community to help and offer comfort to the homeless? I know too well that this is a big issue and we cannot solve it by ourselves. We need partners – faith communities, civic groups, corporations, governments, and individuals. But I also know too well that many of us here at BCUC has been supporting programs that respond to the issue of homelessness. Programs like the Multi-Faith Housing Initiative or Raising the Roof. This advent, we have the opportunity to support the Sleeping Children Around the World Program which is also another way of showing that we care for the most vulnerable of the population – the children. I'm sure there are many other ways where we can show that we care by supporting women shelters, the Mission, Operation Go Home and Habitat for Humanity. The possibilities to help are endless. We can do it.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". These words need to be heard not only those who are homeless but also by those who face death and life-threatening illnesses. These words must be heard by those who suffer because of broken relationships. These words need to be heard by those who lost their jobs, who faces issues of economic poverty, or those who experienced great financial loss. These words must address those who lost everything as a result of dictatorship, or the greed of political leaders, of failed government and a failed nation. These words need to be heard by children and teenagers who are intimidated, bullied, rejected by their peers, who have no friends, who feel abandoned by family. The victims of abuse badly need to hear these words. Women and children who suffer behind closed doors, because of physical,

sexual and emotional abuse! You need to hear these words of comfort if you carry the heavy burden of self-blame or guilt. If you are pressed down by stress, hopelessness, sadness, loneliness and heartache, you need to be comforted. But these words of comfort mean nothing unless they are turned into action. Only when we do acts of comfort that true peace is attained. Advent is an intentional time during which we prepare the way for a different, radical reality to take hold in our lives. Second Isaiah declares, prepare the way! Prepare the way for new life to come into your life. Make way for peace. Make way for something new by letting go of irrelevant matters. Make way for new hopes by letting go of old disappointments. Make way for new joys by letting go of old fears. When you are able to name the places of exile and wilderness in your life, you will be able to name also the opportunities for peace and homecoming. Peace happens when exile and words of comfort meet. Advent is a perfect time to live into this calling - a time for giving voice to the possibilities opening in the here and now. And we continue to work to offer comfort and peace as we wait. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC lectionary Group, rickmorley.com, Bruce Epperley, patheos.org, Michael K. Marsh, interruptingthesilence.com, Tim Suttle, patheos.com.