

Longest Night Service

12-19-21

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 1-11

Meditation: Uneven Ground and Rough Places

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

The Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd;
and will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

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We gather here this afternoon because sometime in the last year or in the last few years or maybe sometime farther back something in our life changed – someone we loved died and time is marked in a different way. Or somehow the collective grief of losses from the COVID-19 pandemic - the lost opportunities, the lost connections, the lost traditions has changed things and time is marked in a different way. There was then and there is now. The poetic

words from the prophet Isaiah I just read, words that we hear each Advent season, mark a season in the life of the Hebrew people when their life had changed – a that was then, this is now moment.

For the Hebrew people it was a time of exile – they were removed from their beloved land of Israel when the Babylonians conquered – moved from the daily patterns of life they knew so well – the morning rituals, the shared meals, the shorthand phrases and gestures that communicated so much more than the surface, the plans for the future. They were moved to a strange land – and while there were many familiar elements and familiar people, it was not the same. Sometimes it was just bit off kilter – as if they were moving at a slightly slower speed than everyone else and couldn't quite catch up. Sometimes it was so unfamiliar and foreign they couldn't make any sense of it. Sometimes it was even hard to remember what it had been like before. They were disoriented. They were sad for what they had lost and what they would not have. They were angry. They were afraid. And while they were grateful for what they had in the past, they were a little sorry they did appreciate it more. It was an uneven road for these Hebrew people, living with the very human mix of emotions we experience when there is a loss. Emotions you might have felt or be feeling today.

And into this swirl of emotions we hear these words – “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” There is so much richness in these words from God. The literal meaning of the Hebrew phrase that is translated “speak tenderly” is “heart speak.” God is speaking to the hearts of the Hebrew people and God is speaking to our hearts today.

A voice cries out: “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.” For the Hebrew people the prophet was asking for a smooth commute home when they were released from exile. Riding on a donkey for days on end, up and down mountains bordered by steep ravines, through meandering desert valleys where water and food were scarce for days and weeks at a time. I guessing that all that time on a donkey through rough terrain would make me pine for 15 minute of severe turbulence on an airplane.

And that is what we sometimes wish for when it comes to our grief and our sense of loss. That is what we sometimes wish for in this pandemic – we will take short term restrictions if we know when things will return to normal. That there would be this sharp and fast pain, like pulling off a band aid. And then it would be over and we get on with our life. But instead it is more like the journey home after exile – mountain days when you are crawling and dragging your way to the top in the hope of a changed perspective; days when the desert valley is so stifling you can't even get tears out. And the days when you are walking across the plains, ordinary days, the days when the journey seems manageable and the days when vista is broad enough that you can see the possibilities of tomorrow. It is an uneven road that grief and uncertainty travel.

Isaiah goes on to tell us that it is in traveling the uneven roads and rough terrain where the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. The glory is the God's light shining before us – illuminating the path. It is this glory - this light- that helps makes the uneven paths a bit more level and the rough places more of a plain. It is a light that, as the prophet reminds us in the end of the passage, is a reflection of a compassionate and nurturing God, one who will feed a flock like a shepherd and will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. It is this God who knows every bump and jostle we encounter,

every ordinary day, as well as every day where we experience joy and hope and love on the uneven road of grieving and loss.

One of the challenges we face as we are grieving and experiencing uncertainty is how closely we cling to the road. When the paths are uneven, we have tendency to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground, shoes gripping each step, one foot in front of the other. We can forget to look up, instead our focus is so firmly fixed on the small patch in front of us. But God encourages us to loosen our grip a little, to allow the starlight to guide us on the darkest of nights, to allow light to shine into the cracks so we can see the way God is holding our hand or even cradling us. The poet and pastor Ted Loder has a prayer in his book *Guerillas of Grace* entitled "Loosen My Grip."¹ He prays:

O God, it is hard for me to let go, most times,
and the squeeze I exert,
garbles me and gnarls others.
So, loosen my grip a bit
on the good times,
on the moments of sunlight and star shine and joy,
that the thousand graces they scatter as they pass
may nurture growth in me rather than turn to brittle memories.
Loosen my grip
on my ways and words,
on my fears and fretfulness
that letting go into the depths of silence
and my own uncharted longings,
I may find myself held by you and linked anew to all life
in this wild and wondrous world you love so much,
so I may take to heart that you have taken me to heart.

Friends, when find ourselves in the long nights, in the dark moments; when we find ourselves wondering when the light will return and if life will ever be normal again; when the road is anything but straight and the ground so uneven we feel like we will never be able to be upright, let us remember: The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. The Lord will feed his flock like a shepherd; and will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. May it be so.

¹Loder, Ted. Loosen My Grip. In: *Guerillas of Grace. Prayers for the Battle*. Augsburg Books. 1981. p54-55.