

“Alert to the Promise of Comfort”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
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While wandering the Seminary library last week, I found a special shelf of books. It's full of children's books that relate to the themes of Advent. One book I found reminded a great deal of the Old Testament passages Vismai and James read today. I would like to read it to you. Since there are great pictures in the book, at least some of you should see them. I'd like to invite the children in the congregation to meet me up here. You can be young or young at heart . . . You just have to be able to sit on the floor!

This is *A Child's Garden: A Story of Hope* by Michael Foreman.

The boy saw it after a night of rain, a speck of green in the rubble, peeping up toward the sunlight. He moved some broken bricks so that nothing would fall and crush the tiny plant. He didn't know what sort of plant it was, a flower or a weed; he just knew it would have to struggle to survive.

The boy searched around and found an old can that held a little rainwater. He brought it to the plant. "Drink up," he whispered. "Drink up." The sun was climbing in the sky, and the boy gave the plant shade with some old sacking and wire.

The boy's world was a place of ruin and rubble, ringed by a fence of barbed wire. In the hot, dry summer, the air was thick with dust. Faraway hills shimmered in the haze. The boy knew that cool streams flowed in those hills. He had once gone there with his father, but now the hills were on the wrong side of the wire.

Over the following weeks, he cared for his secret garden. Soon the green tendrils reached to the high barbed-wire fence. Now the boy could tell it was a vine – a grapevine. It spread along the fence and gave shade to its own tender roots, which in turn sent out more shoots. Birds and butterflies came, bringing seeds and pollen on their wings. The garden grew. It was no longer a secret. Friends came to sit in its shade, and it became a playground for the children.

Then, one day, soldiers came and destroyed everything. They threw the vine in a ditch on the other side of the wire. The boy thought his heart would break.

Winter came. The boy and his family shivered in the cold and damp of their ruined home.

Spring came late. After the first night of rain for weeks, the boy noticed green shoots all along the ditch. Some seeds from his vine must have survived the

winter. He worried about the new shoots. He couldn't get close enough to water them. They were on the other side of the wire.

Then, one evening, he saw a little girl playing by the ditch. She had a bucket, and she was sprinkling water on the tiny plants. Each evening she returned. The boy hoped the soldiers wouldn't notice. But they didn't seem to mind plants growing on their side of the fence.

Before long, the boy saw tiny specks of green peeping from the rubble where his garden had been. "Look!" he yelled. "Come and see! My vine has come back!" He began collecting water and once more tended his garden. Soon it reached the wire, where it became entwined with the green tendrils from the little girl's side. The barbed wire disappeared under the leafy shade, and the new garden became home once more to birds and butterflies.

*Let the soldiers return, thought the boy. Roots are deep, and seeds spread . . . One day the fence will disappear forever, and we will be able to walk again into the hills.*¹

Roots are deep, and seeds spread, the little boy came to see. It gave him hope that one day the soldiers whose guns were pointed at him would go away. One day, the fence that held him captive would disappear. One day, he would return to the beauty and abundance of the hills. The stubborn seed and resilient grapevine gave the boy *hope* for a better life. That's what Isaiah wanted for his people, too: hope for a better life.

Isaiah spoke to the people of Jerusalem about the transformation God wanted for them and the person God was sending to help bring it about. Walter Brueggeman highlights the verbs Isaiah uses to describe the work this person will do: to bring, to bind up, to proclaim, to release, to comfort, to provide, to give. All are ministries to weak and powerless and marginalized people – the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives. These ministries will “restore them to *full function* in a community of well-being and joy.”² Sure as a garden grows.

It's great news . . . not only for folks who are in pretty obvious pain – the boy amidst the barbed wire, for instance, or people in exile. God reaches *especially* to them, perhaps. But *this* – this news from Isaiah . . . ? It is good news for *all of us*.

Presbyterian pastor Joanna Adams once observed a young advertising executive in the church she was serving at the time: he came every week to volunteer at the foot clinic in the church's shelter for homeless men in Atlanta. In appearance, Joanna said, the young man was right out of *GQ* magazine . . . and in his capacity for compassion, he was near to the heart of God. Joanna asked him once why he came every week, and he said, “I [think] Jesus meant what he said in the 25th chapter of Matthew (about ministering to the

¹ Candlewick Press, 2009.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. 212-218. Italics, mine.

“least of these”). [And I figure, if I’m going to encounter the spirit of Christ, I probably will right *here*] . . . Besides, these guys and I are not all that different. They wear their brokenness on the outside. I wear mine on the inside. But brokenness is brokenness. It is the condition we share.”³

I was at a meeting a couple of weeks ago, and the wife of one of the participants came along. She introduced herself by saying, “I’m just listening in . . . I’m too fragile to do much more these days.” She had recently had back surgery and was still in some pain. There had also been a fire in their house; it destroyed the kitchen. “I just feel so broken,” she said. “Really I think we’re all so broken, every one of us.” I thought: Yes . . . and *you’re* kind of a mess right now. I felt bad for her, really. But later that very night, a friend of mine, in kindness, asked a question that touched a painful place in *me*. I went to the bathroom to cry it out, and guess who found me there? It was funny, in a way. She put her arms around me and said, “It’s true! We’re all so broken!”

We aren’t always so *weepy*, though. We wear our brokenness all kinds of ways, and for all kinds of reasons. Recently I spoke with a friend grieving a parent who’s died; she said, “I’m fine until someone hugs me. This is going to take me some time.” We are captive to grief, to fear, to secrets we keep, to loneliness, to restlessness, to ambition. Sometimes it’s just a dull ache – the feeling that things are not right in our lives. We are distant – many of us – from the places we want to be . . . in our most intimate relationships, in our homes, at the places we work. We long for things that seem to be out of reach. It may not move us to tears, but that *longing* is another kind of brokenness.

Old Testament scholar Bill Brown says that God’s aim, so beautifully articulated in Isaiah, is comfort – comfort for all of God’s people. This comfort means more than the wiping away of tears. It is tied to restoration. It’s the comfort of a new and whole creation.

Often Christians imagine this as something that will come to us after we die – eschatological healing. In a book called *Amazing Grace*, Jonathan Kozol documented the lives of children in the South Bronx, kids in great need of comfort. One of them – Anthony, who was 13 years old – described God’s restoration in such a way. In an essay he titled, “God’s Kingdom,” Anthony said,

God will be there. He’ll be happy that we have arrived. People will come hand-in-hand . . . As for television, forget it! If you want vision, you can use your eyes to see the people that you love. No one will look at you from the outside. People will see you from the inside. All the people from the street will be there. My uncle will be there and he will be healed. You won’t see him buying drugs, because there won’t be no money . . . No violence will be there in heaven. There will be no guns or drugs or IRS. You won’t have to pay taxes. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them. At night he’ll come and visit your house. God will be fond of you.

³ Joanna Adams, in a sermon preached November 29, 1992 at the Trinity Presbyterian Church of Atlanta, cited in Bob Dunham’s book *Expecting God’s Surprises*, 83-4.

How will you know that you are there? Something will tell you, “This is it! Eureka!” If you still feel lonely in your heart, or bitterness, you’ll know that you’re not there [yet].”⁴

Comfort means restoration: real and utter freedom, utter healing, like Anthony described. It’s the inheritance the Scriptures promise, and it’s God’s desire for people – *all people*. We will know it *fully* when God’s kingdom comes. But the comfort of which Isaiah speaks is not only meant for the future. God is transforming the world here and now, and we are called to be part of that transformation. We are meant to exist for the sake of the oppressed and mournful and brokenhearted, just as God does. We’re invited to be part of God’s healing, freeing work today.

I didn’t set out to advertise this church’s Alternative Giving opportunities, but it occurs to me: all are ways to share God’s transforming work. When you buy a grain bag, you invest in an African community’s efforts to be free of hunger and of markets that make life hard. When you contribute toward the scholarship at Forman College, you help to liberate Nafees Anjun from the poverty that’s defined so much of his life; you free him for broader horizons, intellectual growth, and the chance to contribute more substantially to his own community in Pakistan. When you support the Daughters of Zelophehad, you provide those women shelter . . . you sponsor activities that will build their confidence and help them to function more fully and with joy. When you deliver gifts to residents of the Palace Adult Home, you remind them they are not alone. All those efforts are like seeds that grow: a garden of comfort and hope.

There are other things you can *do* to help restore the people around you and experience in your *own* life a measure of God’s comfort. Offer a helping hand. Write a note to say, “I’m thinking about you.” Cook a meal. Rake a yard. Lend an ear. Give a hug. The spirit of the Lord is upon you, instilling such efforts with a power beyond your own – to bring, to bind up, to release, to comfort, to give. Sure as a garden grows.

I read another book in the library, and while I won’t ask kids forward to read it, I want to share with you a few of its images. They are helpful, I think, to people who await God’s comfort. The title is *Hope is an Open Heart*, and it was written by Lauren Thompson of Brooklyn, NY. She says she learned much of what she knows about hope in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as she helped her four-year-old son feel safe again in his city and in the world. Thompson wrote:

Sometimes hope feels far away. But hope is always there.
Hope is the warmth of strong arms around you.
Hope is sad tears flowing, making room for joy.
Hope is angry words bursting, making room for understanding.
Hope is scared words asking for help, and finding that help is there.
Hope is knowing that you are loved. Hope is knowing that you love others
Hope is finding happiness in simple things.
Hope is daring to do something you’ve never done before.

⁴ As cited in Christine Chakoian’s paper for the 2011 meeting of the Moveable Feast.

Hope is remembering that you are not alone. Many others feel just the way you do.
Many others care.

Hope is a candle flame in the darkness.

[It's] is the clear sky above the gray clouds . . .

[It] is knowing that things change and that we can help things to change for the better.⁵

In this season of Advent, as we await the coming of one who will bring, bind up, release, comfort, and provide the restoration we need, may we take hope . . . every way we can.

⁵ Lauren Thompson, *Hope is an Open Heart*, Scholastic Press, NY, 2008