

First Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Erin Gilmore
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Voices Cry Out

Isaiah 40:1-11

My mother in law was here over Thanksgiving, and on Thursday we got a thank you card in the mail, included in the card was the following excerpt from her own church bulletin the Sunday after thanksgiving:

If you can start the day without caffeine or pep pills,
If you can relax without liquor,
if you can sleep without the aid of drugs,
If you can conquer tension without medical help,
if you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,
if you can resist complaining and boring people with your troubles,
if you can eat the same food everyday and be grateful for it,
if you can understand when loved ones are too busy to give you time,
If you can overlook when people take things out on you, when, through no fault of yours,
something goes wrong,
if you can take criticism and blame without resentment,
If you can face the world without lies and deceit,
if you can do all these things,
then you are probably the family dog.

I sometimes marvel as watch Stella, our 90 pound black lab, going about her day - eagerly waiting for the same breakfast, happily greeting us when we get home...There is no part of the day she has to stop and ask, " What does it mean to be a dog?"

But we humans - we are a little more complicated...We are susceptible to forces that confuse and confound us.We do stay up in the middle of the night wondering: who am I? why are we here? What is the purpose of all of this?

Take any moment in time and you will see both our capacity for goodness and for evil. We experience incredible beauty and unbearable suffering. We are magnificent creations of God and we knowingly and unknowingly cause harm to those around us.

Our journey through advent began last Sunday with the story of King Josiah, who upon discovering a book of the Torah, became incredibly clear about wanting to add more goodness than evil. And so he initiated a reformation of sorts to reorient himself and his people in the ways of the Lord.

This was in stark contrast to the kings before him who had amassed great riches and wealth, ignoring the poor and the widow and the orphan and the stranger. Under their rule many innocent lives had been sacrificed on the altars of political gain. Josiah's effort to course correct were commendable, but as we learn in the scriptures, it was not enough, ultimately, to save the nation of Judah. In 587 BCE, king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege to land, burned down the temple and took many of the leaders and priests captive.

The kings and priests and the ruling elites had of course been warned of the doom to come if they kept on ignoring the ways of the Lord.

In the very first chapter of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of God's dismay:

I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
your festivals my soul hates. I am weary of bearing them.
when you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you
your hands are full of blood.
wash yourselves. make yourself clean.
remove the evil doings learn to do good,
seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

In chapter 2: The Lord rises to argue his case: he stands to judge the peoples:

"The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: it is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?"

This is the tenor for most of the entire 39 chapters - save for a few passages where there prophet speaks of the time after the coming exile when "a new shoot will come from the stump of Jesse" but even those passages there is reference to the time of exile.

Over and over the prophet calls the kings and the priests to accountability. That is what prophets do. They do not, as is sometimes assumed, predict the future, they are truth tellers of the present moment - they are the often unpopular voices that cry out - pay attention! do you not see the dead end at the end of this road?

But we humans - We humans are a complicated and often frustrating lot. We don't always like to hear those voices. Our egos, our pride, our greed, our fear, they drown out those voices.

And so finally in chapter 39 Isaiah says to king hezekiah (who followed Josiah)

"Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon. some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away, in the palace of the king of Babylon. "

If you want to know what that experience was like for the Israelites, read the book of laments, or any number of the psalms. By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and we wept. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter [root: *n-ch-m*] is far from me, one to revive my courage; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed." (Lamentations 1:16 NRSV)

It would seem that in 587 the end had come. The promised land has been destroyed. The people are desolate. The land is desolate. Their spirit is desolate.

This too, is it not, part of the experience of being human?

But thankfully the book of Isaiah doesn't end at chapter 39. We turn the page to Isaiah 40 and find this:

"Comfort, O comfort my people - speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her, her penalty is paid." For us this moment is a turn of a page, but for those in exile it was an eternity. How long they had waited for God to come near. How long they had endured the deafening silence. How long they wondered if God had forsaken them..."

But what had been hidden becomes visible again:

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, every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all the people shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Upon hearing this good news the prophet is not sure what to say. He writes, A voice says, "Cry out" and I say, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers the flower fades - surely the people are grass." The prophet wonders...what's the point? The people are only going to disappoint you again. War again. Fail again. Turn from you again. Turn on one another again. They are not constant. They do not see clearly. They do not stay true. They are, after all, human. Why are you mindful of them?

And this is the response to the prophet: Yes, the grass withers, yes the flower fades, yes humans are like grass. But the word of our lord stands forever.

Humans will hate each other. they will love each other. they will fail to be their brother's keeper and they will die defending one another. They will worship false god of money and power and fame and they will glorify God with their compassion and humility. Regardless, God will be God. God will draw near because that is who God is. That is God's nature. God is the divine love that flows in and through all creation - it is unstoppable, unbreakable, unending ... it can't be undone. (god dog?) This isn't really a text about what it means to be human. This is a text that points to what we mean when we talk about God. God hears the cries of the suffering. God draws

near to the exile in waiting. God comes to the broken-hearted. God moves in the direction of righteousness and mercy.

Several hundred years after the prophet Isaiah, when the followers of Jesus witnessed their friend and leader die on a cross in the most painful and humiliating way imaginable, they too felt forsaken and exiled.

But this Divine Love, more powerful, more spacious, more encompassing than we have adequate words for, was still moving, still working, still speaking and on the third day his followers experienced the risen Christ.

In the midst of the most complicated and confusing and exiling experience of what it is to be human, this is what the scriptures attest: God will draw near. God will gather the exile, like a shepherd he will feed his sheep, and like a mother she will gather them in her arms and lead them. God will be with us.

And so it is ours, as humans, as people of faith, to wait and to watch for the coming of our Lord, for the presence of the Spirit among us. And when we see God draw near it is ours to get up to that high mountain and proclaim: Here is Your God. I caught a glimpse on thursday, when I sat with Ginny and Pete and their grand daughter Cassie and watched as Ginny lovingly and tenderly fed Pete his lunch and a hospice worker sang John Denver's country roads. In this season of Advent, as we wait for Christ to be born again into our world and into our lives, what are the signs that you see?

I have up here a couple of baskets full of empty ornaments. In a just a moment I'd like to invite any kids who want to help me to come up and help me pass them out - one for each household - and my instruction to take this home, and decorate it in some way that helps you remember that truth of Christmas, that God is with us. We will bring back these ornaments and put them on the tree here in the sanctuary and let them be little reminders that Emmanuel, God with us, has come to us and is with us right here, in our very midst.