

“What Shall I Cry?”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Advent 2B

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Isaiah 40:1-11  
Mark 1:1-8

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Even though I grew up in the church and probably heard these words repeatedly, they did not stand out to me until I was in the seventh grade. I had a chorus teacher who really mentored me, in a year of many transitions including the changing of schools. I respected her tremendously and I loved her class. Some teachers are like prophets: they have the ability to lift up the lowly and proclaim good news to the downtrodden. Perhaps that power is one reason people have tried to control teachers in today’s political world— they know how impactful a teacher can be. Anyway, when this teacher told us that she would be performing the Christmas portion of Handel’s *Messiah* with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chamber Chorus, and that it would be broadcast on our local PBS channel, I watched it. Not only that, I recorded it on our VCR. Somehow, the coming together of wonderful music under the direction of Robert Shaw, and a teacher who seemed to really care about me, also awakened these words of scripture that had already been part of my tradition but had lain unnoticed.

It was a time when kids had the opportunity to be bored, and I did not have cable, and YouTube was not yet a thing, and I did not know a lot of people yet at my new school, so I played that tape of The Messiah over and over again, and I borrowed a score of the Messiah from my teacher so I could try to follow and sing along. The next year, she invited me to a free viewing of the dress rehearsal, and that was really exciting.

One thing that stood out to me was that my own prophetic tradition from scripture offered these words so beautifully sung: that “every valley shall be exalted, and every hill made low.” It’s kind of unforgettable, in Handel’s score, because the word “exalted,” when the tenor solo sings it, has at least 48 notes to it. I won’t sing it for you, but I will say that it literally cascades back and forth over mountains and valleys in the written score. I began wondering what that really means, for the valley to be exalted, and the hills to be made low. As a seventh grader, I was moving out of concrete thinking and able to think more metaphorically, as I pondered what these words were telling us.

The prior year, as I have shared before in my sermons, my mom and I had been evicted from our home because she had been many months late on her rent. It took several months where I stayed at my dad’s house, and my mom stayed with her sister, before she got back on her feet enough to secure another apartment for us. When that eviction happened, I did not understand all the factors involved. But I did sense a great injustice at it, and felt a mix of anger and lament at the unfairness of it all. In my school and in my church communities, there was a great deal of

affluence. In contrast, although I saw my mom working hard at everything, I could not understand why it was so difficult for her to scrape by with just the basics.

And so, the words of Handel's Messiah really spoke to me. And though the Hallelujah Chorus may be the favorite, beloved part of the Messiah for most people, what I loved most were those opening movements written from Isaiah 40. To me, they were assurance that God *does* have a plan for comforting those who have experienced suffering, and that God has a vision that can shape a world where there will be fairness: where children don't lose their homes, and mothers don't become consumed by debt. I realized that these words, which probably had glossed over my head for many years in church, were actually good news from our faith story that I needed to hear.

Interestingly, I recently learned, as I was reading up on Handel and the writing of *The Messiah*, that Handel gave very generously to orphans, retired musicians, and the ill, and he gave all his proceeds from the opening of *The Messiah* to a debtor's prison and to a hospital. \*I also learned that he once challenged a fellow composer and musician to a nearly fatal duel, over a dispute about seating in the orchestra pit. Because Handel's opponent's sword landed upon the brass button in Handel's, blunting the thrust of his sword, Handel escaped death<sup>1</sup>. I guess no one's perfect! Did I mention that he gave proceeds of his work to the debtor's prison?

The section of Isaiah we read today begins what we know as "Second Isaiah." Even though Isaiah looks like one, unified book with 66 chapters, scholars and readers for years have known there is a demarcation between Isaiah 1-39, which speaks of the 8th century in the reign of Ahaz and Hezekiah, and what they call Second Isaiah, which begins over 200 years later. Isaiah the 8th century prophet, which is the voice of the first part of Isaiah, speaks of Jerusalem's favored status, and the commitment that God will *always* be with them, on their side, supporting them, because the Temple is there— and God will never let the Temple be destroyed.

Well *that* didn't work out very well! As we see in 587 BCE, Jerusalem and all of Judah are conquered by Babylon. The Temple is destroyed. The Hebrew people have been deported into exile in Babylon. By the time Isaiah 40 gets written, they have been in Babylon for 50 years. As the voice from Second Isaiah picks up the prophetic tradition, a traumatized people are asking, *What happened?*

Has God abandoned them? Is God not powerful? These questions plagued God's people as they wondered how they got in this sort of predicament. And yet, the prophetic tradition had been sent to them already, saying that they paved the way toward their displacement. They had been the ones to mistreat the poor among them. They had been the ones to exploit the widow and ignore the orphan. Historians have shown that the demise of many of the major empires of the world was triggered by the growing chasm in society between rich and poor. The grass withers, the flower fades. Empires rise and fall. If you cannot be a people that tends to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Kandell, "The Glorious History of Handel's Messiah" in *The Smithsonian Magazine*. December 2009.

most vulnerable among you, then your status as a privileged people will probably not last indefinitely.

One thing that is hard to swallow is that consequences in the bible are often meted out upon a whole people, not just individual bad players. There is a sense in scripture that humanity is bound up to one another; if one member suffers, all suffer; and if one member rejoices, all rejoice. And in first Isaiah, even though they also had an enemy in the Assyrian empire, they were assured although they had violated their covenant with God, God would lead them back to righteousness, establish a powerful king in the line of David, and make the people a blessing to all the nations.

Second Isaiah begins with gracious honesty. It is as if the prophet is saying, “There, there. I see you and your hardship. Take comfort.” But the prophet does not shy away from telling the people that they have sinned. They have screwed up, and have seen the consequences of their actions, through the exile. Now, they have suffered more than double for what they had done, and God is giving them a new start. Will it be any different?

Maybe this time, God is who is different. Second Isaiah goes on to speak of who will lead the people, and this time it is not a king who comes in power and might, but in the figure of the suffering servant. Christians later appropriated this Jewish text to point to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Sure enough, the babe on whom we await in Bethlehem comes in meekness, not in armed strength. A voice cries out from the wilderness. Will this cry from broken places be the cry that saves us?

At the end of the night Chris likes to show me funny videos she sees on social media. It’s her way of relaxing: to bookend the day with laughter. Usually the videos feature animals doing goofy things. Interspecies friendship is always a hit: a dog who is best friends with a duck is a good way to forget about the pressures work brought that day. The other night Chris showed me a picture of a baby sucking on his pacifier. His mom started to cry, and so the baby put his pacifier in his mom’s mouth. And she stopped crying. But then the baby started to cry, because he was without his pacifier. And so the mom stuck the pacifier back in the baby’s mouth. Then the mom started to cry again. And so the baby put his pacifier back in her mouth, to stop the crying. But he was uncomfortable, and so started to cry again. She watched this over and over again, laughing beyond words each time.

Who is that voice, crying from the wilderness? I wonder if God feels as if, in order to pacify God’s people— to make peace, and tend to our cries, God has to give up something which God also needs. It certainly feels as if that is the case in our human efforts to make peace: in order for someone to be fulfilled, someone else has to go empty.

Mark’s gospel also begins with a voice crying out in the wilderness, and it announces the prophet and baptizer John. He was a cousin of Jesus, but he lived a wild life: removed and free from complicity in any of the comforts of empire, he offered a different voice.

John's advice to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make the pathways straight," is reminiscent of the prophet in Isaiah's advise, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." When I read that line, I picture driving on Route 66 through the Arizona desert and clearing the dust and tumbleweed off the road. But as I think about this passage, and what it might mean to a people who have lost all they have loved, including their Temple, it means that just as God has become different to find an approach to meet us— this time, through the meekness of an infant child, a prince of peace rather than a prince of might, we also need to find ways to become different, so that we can explore how to clear the pathways to meet God when God shows up.

What pathways are you clearing? How are you making way? What are you crying out? How might salvation find you this season of Advent?