“Comforting with Tender Talk!”
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, Isaiah 40:1-11,
2 Peter 3:8-15a, Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2014

By Rev. Dan Clark
Interim Associate Minister
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A reading from the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 1, verses 1-8.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”
4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is
coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Lee Harvey Oswald didn’t act alone. JFK was shot while riding in a motorcade in Dallas in 1963. Oswald, who himself was murdered two days later, was arrested for Kennedy’s murder, but many people believe that the CIA or the mafia or Fidel Castro or even Lyndon Johnson was behind JFK’s assassination. The question is… who was on the grassy knoll?

Elvis has never left the building. There are numerous Elvis sightings. In fact, I think I saw him in Hilliard a couple years ago. Did he want to escape public life? Is he in a witness relocation program? Is Elvis still alive?

The 1969 Apollo moon landing was a hoax. There are holes in the evidence – altered photos, videos, and recordings. It’s believed that it was manufactured on a sound stage in Hollywood as a way to win the space race against the Soviets.
Do you believe in conspiracy theories? Do you have a few of your own? These three examples are from the 60s and 70s, because contemporary examples are too numerous to choose from. In an age of polarized politics and social views and a 24 hour news industry, conspiracy theories abound. Are you a believer? Are you a skeptic? Are you yourself a conspirator?

This morning’s lesson from the Hebrew Prophet, Isaiah, comes to us from a very specific historical setting.

It is 50 years into the Babylonian exile. Previously, the people of God had been displaced and deported by the most powerful nation on earth. And the politics, while not overtly hostile, were systematically oppressive. Under Babylonian exile, the Jews were on the fast track to extinction. Not because Babylon enacted ethnic cleansing by murdering millions of Jews, but rather because it was Babylon’s policy to cleanse the earth of the culture of conquered peoples. This left Jerusalem in ruins. People with resources were relocated out of the city, taken to Babylon so they could assimilate and contribute. The upper and educated classes of Judah then built homes and did business in a foreign land. But because of that, now left in the city were only the poor. The city had become a ghetto because big business was in
bed with the emperor and the urban and uneducated poor were of no use in that scheme. And their supposed uselessness left them homeless, voiceless, breathless.

Homeless.

In Babylon they were exiles and refugees, living in a foreign land. In Jerusalem they were unemployed and underemployed, living in a wasteland. In both places, they were homeless. The sense that they belonged in a place with a people had been ripped from their hands. They were homeless. The Columbus Dispatch reported just last month that more than 47,500 children in Ohio were homeless at some point this year. Adrienne Corbett, executive director of the Homeless Families Foundation said “since 2011 there has been a 79 percent increase in the number of families served in our emergency-shelter system in central Ohio.”

Voiceless.

In Babylon, their religion was odd and their language was obsolete. In Jerusalem, no one was listening, no one cared that buildings were in ruins and the streets were unsafe. They were voiceless. Did you know that most people who
don’t vote don’t vote because they think their vote won’t make a difference? They have the sense that no one understands them, no one is listening. But these voiceless non-voters have a few things in common. A third of them are under 30 years old. Over 40 percent of non-voters are Hispanic, African-American, or other racial and ethnic minorities. Nearly half of non-voters are less affluent than their voting counterparts. And more than half of non-voters did not attend college. They have been silenced by the centuries-old belief that young lives don’t matter, that the lives of people of color don’t matter, that poor lives don’t matter, that uneducated lives don’t matter. Homeless. Voiceless.

And breathless.

In Babylon, the people of God were slowly expiring, like dying from cultural carbon monoxide poisoning. They were falling asleep, losing their identity, slipping into cultural and religious apathy. Meanwhile in Jerusalem, life was very hard. If the people of God were expiring in Babylon, they were forever perspiring in Jerusalem. Carving out a life in underserved and overlooked places is exhausting and nearly impossible. They were homeless, voiceless, and breathless. Breathless...like Eric Garner. Garner, a black man, was
apprehended by a white cop in New York City for allegedly selling untaxed, loose cigarettes. Officer Daniel Pantaleo put an unthreatening and unarmed person in a chokehold, a method prohibited by the NYPD. Garner said repeatedly, “I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.” And then he stopped breathing. The city medical examiner ruled the death a homicide, but just this week, 9 days after a grand jury did not indict Officer Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a grand jury in New York did not indict Officer Pantaleo in the choking death of Eric Garner. And we can’t breathe.

All people are God’s people, the prophet Isaiah reminds us. And the people of God can’t breathe. We are homeless, voiceless, breathless.

The question on everyone’s mind: is there any comfort for us? The people around the prophet Isaiah were asking over 2,500 years ago whether there was any source of comfort left for a people stripped of self-defense, vulnerable before their captors, bitter of soul as they mourned in a foreign land. The writer of Lamentations says no. A refrain from that collection of ancient poems is ‘there is none to comfort her, there is none to comfort Jerusalem.’ Is there any comfort for them? Is there any comfort for us? Is there comfort for
homeless children in Ohio? Is there comfort for those who don’t vote because they believe their young voice or black voice or poor voice or uneducated voice doesn’t matter? Is there comfort for the late Eric Garner?

And this is why I believe in conspiracy theories. And I’m not talking about JFK or Elvis or Apollo 11. In fact, I believe Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone gunman, that Elvis was buried in Memphis in 1977, and that Neil Armstrong took one small step for a man and one giant leap for humankind. I’m not talking about those conspiracies. I’m talking about Advent. I believe in the conspiracy of a loving God who brings the homeless home, listens to the voiceless, and fills the lungs of the breathless.

In Isaiah chapter 40, it is 50 years into the Babylonian exile, and now a voice speaks. The message begins softly, tenderly, and quickly escalates into shouting and crying. The people of God were displaced and deported, but a savior has come…and his name is…Cyrus the Persian. The Babylonians ruthlessly obliterated the culture of the people they defeated. But Cyrus had a policy of restoring captive people to their homelands and granting them the financial aid required to rebuild their economic and social and
religious lives. And so things began to change for the refugees and exiles.

God, give us leaders like Cyrus in Congress and courtrooms. God, give us leaders who restore captives and grant aid. God, give us leaders who rebuild and restore. God, give us a world where we all know and believe and live in a way that affirms that young lives matter and poor lives matter and black lives matter.

Because many of us are homeless, voiceless, breathless.

But listen to the words of the prophet…

‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.’ Comfort, nachamu in Hebrew, here literally means ‘to cause to breathe again.’ When we’re expiring and perspiring, what we need is instead to conspire. Comfort literally means to breathe again. Conspire literally means to breathe together. So let us together breathe again because I believe the conspiracy of Advent is comfort. Comfort and joy for the homeless. Comfort and joy for the voiceless. Comfort and joy for the breathless. Comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy.
Thich Naht Hahn, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, who is himself living in exile, gives us this wisdom:

“The fourth element of our body is air. The best way to experience the air element is the practice of mindful breathing. "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." After saying these sentences we can abbreviate them by saying "In" as we breathe in and "Out" as we breathe out. We don't try to control our breathing. Whether our in-breath is long or short, deep or shallow, we just breathe naturally and shine the light of mindfulness on it. When we do this we notice that, in fact, our breathing does become slower and deeper naturally. "Breathing in, my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, my out-breath has become slow." Now we can practice, "Deep/slow." We don't have to make an extra effort. It just becomes deeper and slower by itself, and we recognize that.

“Later on, you will notice that you have become calmer and more at ease."Breathing in, I feel calm. Breathing out, I feel at ease. I am not struggling anymore. Calm / ease." And then, "Breathing in, I smile. Breathing out, I release all my worries and anxieties. Smile / release." We are able to smile to ourselves and release all our worries. There are more than three hundred muscles in our face, and when we know how to breathe in and
smile, these muscles can relax. This is "mouth yoga." We smile and are able to release all our feelings and emotions. The last practice is, "Breathing in, I dwell deeply in the present moment. Breathing out, I know this is a wonderful moment. Present moment / wonderful moment." Nothing is more precious than being in the present moment fully alive and aware. Conscious breathing is a joy.

"In, out
Deep, slow
Calm, ease
Smile, release
Present moment, wonderful moment."

Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. This is the conspiracy of Advent: a loving God causes us to breathe again. Amen.