

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*

There should almost be ... maybe some silence just before this reading from Isaiah. A good long pause. But it would be hard to get it right, because it would have to be a long one. It would have to last ... I dunno. About a hundred and fifty, a hundred and sixty years, give or take?

The last verses of Isaiah 39, the verses that come just before our reading today, are an oracle anticipating some bad times for Jerusalem: "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; nothing shall be left, says the Lord." After that oracle in chapter 39, after that word from God spoken by Isaiah, after this word of judgment is said: There's a loooooong silence, and God does not speak.

A lot happens. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed, empires fall, empires rise up only to fall again, and new empires rise up to take the place of the old ones. And in all this time, this one-hundred and fifty, one hundred and sixty years or so, God does not speak to Isaiah or to Isaiah's community of prophets.

There is no oracle from God. There is no word from God. There is only silence.

And in this silence Jerusalem truly *suffers*: it suffers invasion, it suffers destruction, it suffers exile. And for Isaiah, God's people suffer in the silence of God.

And so imagine being in this place: the last you've heard from God is a word of judgment, and you've suffered under the weight of that judgment for a century and a half. And then, after wondering if God had abandoned you after all, perhaps wondering God does little more than to let bad things happen, maybe thinking that God just wasn't even there anymore, and after that despairing spiritual weariness is passed onto your children, and onto your children's children, and onto your children's children's children, imagine what it would be like to hear after all that suffering in silence, all that tiring quiet, all that baffling distance from God, imagine hearing these words, after all that time, the first words from an otherwise silent mouth of God: "Comfort." "Comfort, O *comfort* my people, says your God."

In Isaiah they are words that signal a major policy shift in God's governance of the world. Imagine God here, standing up at the head of the cabinet table, and telling his heavenly government that their policy priorities are about to change. On this day, after such a long silence, and after his people had borne the seemingly interminable consequences of judgment, on this day comes the *good news*: now is the time for *comfort* above all else. And so God tells all the angels, all the powers under his dominion: Comfort! Comfort my people!

This would have been extraordinarily good news for a despairing and weary community. Because this policy shift, this prioritizing of *comfort* above all else, is something that does not depend on the power of empire nor does it depend on the abilities of the people of God. There is no power in the whole of the world that can prevent what's about to happen: no earthly government can prevent the comfort of God's people. Not Babylon, not nobody.

And perhaps better yet: the good news of comfort doesn't depend on God's people suddenly having a burst of energy or even changing their attitude much. It's a comfort that comes from *God*, and it doesn't matter how despairing, or how weary, or even how despondent God's people might be. Because *God* has decreed it from the nerve-centre of the universe: the comfortless will now be comforted.

This proclamation of *comfort* is the first word time that we hear of *good news* in the Bible. It's called "good tidings" in Isaiah, but it could equally be called good news, it could equally be called *gospel*. And at its heart, the announcement of this good news goes like this: "Here is your God!"

And for Isaiah, this God is one of majesty and mercy. A God of majesty, a God of power, a God who is victorious, a "Lord God" who "comes with might." But not just a God of majesty, but a God of mercy. A God who "will feed his flock like a shepherd" and "gather the lambs in his arms[.]"

I'd like to draw two things out of this reading of Isaiah. The first is about evangelism. Evangelism—sharing the good news, if we were to be Biblical about it—begins for us, as it does for Isaiah, as it does in Scripture, it begins by *pointing*: "Here is your God!"

And then, if we have to get more specific about it, we would again follow Isaiah's lead: our announcement of the Good News is that our God is a God of majesty and mercy. A God who is strong enough to emancipate us, to set us free from the smallest tyrant to the biggest empire in the world. And yet, this God of immeasurable power is gentle enough to attend to us like a shepherd does a flock, gathering lambs into his arms. The Good News, in brief: God is a God of majesty and mercy: powerful enough to free us from *all* that binds us, and gentle enough to carefully bind up our wounds.

The second thing I'd draw out from this, is that all of what I've just said is in play in those first words of Mark: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." If once we felt like God was silent, and if even now we feel like God is silent; if once we were under judgment, and if now we feel as though we are under judgment; if God once felt distant, and if God feels distant from us now; here it comes.

The big shift in policy is taking effect NOW, with "[t]he beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

To a world of silence, and for a people in weary despair, God's policy imperative of *comfort*—a *comfort* accomplished with *majesty* and *mercy*—is announced in the "good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God."

"Here is your God!"

We may be weary, and in what seems like an impossibly long season of silence. (Welcome to Advent.) Nevertheless: stop, wait, listen. The God of might, the God of mercy, is announcing a word of Good News to, and in, Jesus Christ the Son of God: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

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