

December 14, 2020 - The Second Sunday of Advent -
OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Comfort, Comfort, a virtual sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, prerecorded and edited, and presented remotely, via live-stream, in the midst of a worldwide pandemic, the novel coronavirus.

Based on Isaiah 40: 1-5

PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON

Gracious God come near, so near as to oil the hinges of our hearts' doors that they may swing easily and gently, to welcome your coming. Amen

SERMON

You may know the French existentialist or absurdist, Albert Camus. Camus argued that human life is absurd and void of meaning; that the universe is unintelligent, indifferent and, indeed, silent in the face of human need.

I have a good word for you today, a tender word. This word hails from the 8th century Before the Common Era, winging its way through the years, through centuries and millennia, from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. This word is a repudiation of absurdism, of the prospect of meaninglessness. It is so beautiful, this word, so elegant and lovely that it arrives in the form of lullaby and poetry.

"Comfort, comfort, oh my people." It is cradlesong and whisper. It is intimate and tender. "Comfort, comfort, oh my people."

And this, "Speak tenderly to the people. Tell them that their hard times – their suffering and pain are coming to an end."

I have a good and tender word for you today. Albert Camus' view is not our view. Our view is informed by a God of love and compassion, of rescue and restoration. In the world view of Judaism and Christianity, life is rife with meaning. In the world view of Judaism and Christianity, the cavernous expanse of the universe is anything but indifferent. Rather, the universe is God-suffused. At the heart of the universe is the Ancient of Days, Creator God, who is tender, compassionate, benevolent, and parental.

At the heart of the universe is the Holy One who called the universe into being; who separated dark from light at the dawn of time; who breathed into the first human the breath of life; who sent Moses to confront Pharaoh's tyranny; who sent Jesus - love incarnate, God incarnate - to wear our skin and feel our pain, and to know physical joy. At the heart of the universe is the divine, creative force that radiates compassion and delivers rescue.

To a people miserable and suffering, God cries from heaven: “Comfort, Comfort, O my people!”

As soon as those words of comfort, of lullaby are loosed from the mouth of God, a majestic thing occurs in heaven ... anyway, this is how Isaiah sees it, and hears it and tells it.

In response to the divine pathos, Isaiah sees and hears and feels all the whole host of heaven rustling and stirring – all sorts and manner of heavenly beings: courtiers, angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim, the saints of heaven who now dwell with God. I know, it is mysterious and hard to believe, but there you have it, at least as Isaiah saw and heard it. In response to the divine pathos these host of heavenly creatures commence to shouting across heaven to one another: “Hurry, now! Get to it, for God is coming. Rescue is on the way. Up, on your feet! Prepare a way. In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for God.”

In the desert of this dammed pandemic; in the wasteland of racial injustice; in the wilderness of economic despair and desperation. God is coming. So, make ready.

You, over there, Seraphim, lift that valley! You, Cherubim, lower that mountain! Hey, over there, you, angels and archangels, make the uneven ground level! Make those rough places smooth! For God is coming. God is coming to make all things new. God is coming to the rescue.

Now, you can believe Albert Camus – whose world is devoid of angels and prophets; Camus, who inhabits a cold and godless universe. You can stand with Camus and determine that life is absurd, meaningless and the universe indifferent; that your life, your suffering – all suffering – is met with a thumping silence. You can believe that. Camus’ world view is not without merit.

Or, you can stand with the prophet Isaiah; Isaiah, whose ear is tuned to heaven; Isaiah, who bet his life on a God whose essence is compassion, and whose instinct is sympathy.

We, who stand with Isaiah, who posit meaning and goodness; we do prepare God’s way in the forsaken wildernesses of our lives. We prepare for God’s coming by lighting candles to which we have given names: Love, Hope, Joy and Peace. We ready the deserts of our broken hearts, by singing of what is not yet so, in order to will it into existence. When earthly tyrants turn ice-cold hearts to human suffering, we warm and melt the iciness, by lighting small fires of compassion. We pray and in our prayers, we hold God’s suffering earth on our hearts. And, more, we determine to counter hate with love, racism and privilege with equity and inclusion, to meet suffering with kindness, and hunger with nourishment. We make music to bring beauty into a world threatened by ugliness. We give our money away in fierce, defiant acts of generosity. We steward a

building intended to point beyond this world's coldness of heart, toward a heavenly realm warmed and brightened by the light of God's prodigious love.

Old South Church, in this hard, harsh world – in this world where the rich get richer and richer and ever richer; and the powerful are at a sinful remove from human suffering – we stand for something ... something tender and beautiful, intimate and ancient, something holy. We reject meaninglessness and absurdity and coldness of heart. We give witness to the divine nature whose dominion is compassion.

This ministry of meaning matters. This world of prophetic poetry matters. This life of ritual and rhythm, of Sabbath keeping and candle lighting, matters. This dedication to beauty and kindnesses, these matter.

Every single act of kindness, every single candle lit, every carol sung, every child dressed as angel or shepherd or lamb, every winter coat purchased for a child in poverty, every act of sanctuary ... each is a repudiation of the absurdist's philosophy of meaninglessness and indifference.

By these, we who sit in darkness, prepare for the coming light. We put our trust in God, not in earthly rulers. And, at our best, together, as a church, we take up the cry: "Comfort, comfort, oh my people. Your suffering is seen and felt. Your rescue is at hand. God is coming. In the wilderness, prepare the way!"

BENEDICTION

May the light that illumines every soul
Shine and make plain your way
Until we see even as we are seen
And we know even as we are known
Until we measure even as we are measured
Until the light of your life, is joined with the Light beyond all light
And the kingdom of God is come and heaven and earth are one.

God's Advent blessing be with you and remain with you this season and every season, this day and every day. Amen.