

Sunday, December 04, 2011
Orinda Community Church UCC
A Sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

A STORY OF CONSOLATION

Isaiah 40:1-11

I. Today, and through each of the four Sundays of Advent here at Orinda Community Church, we are exploring some of the great stories of scripture that point the way and guide us onward toward Christmas. “Advent” literally means arrival, or coming, and this season has always been a time that Christians have used to “prepare a way,” as the prophet says, for the incarnation of our God in Jesus of Nazareth.

Just so, during these weeks of late November and December we light the candles of memory and hope, and hear again some magnificent words of divine promise from the Old and New Testaments. We may meet a few of the biblical characters who contribute to the Christmas story, and sing their songs of longing and rejoicing. The church is beautifully decorated as if to receive the Creator of heaven and earth, and the colors of the preacher’s stole change to the sobering blues and purples of inward preparation and anticipation.

The 6th century BC prophet Isaiah, whose story we visit this morning, proclaims a message of obvious urgency. “Prepare a way!” he shouts, and the way he has in mind is an actual highway across the vast Arabian desert that separates his people from their true home in Judea. For more than a generation now, the Judeans have been prisoners and exiles in Babylon, survivors of a devastating war they were warned by God not to seek with the powerful Chaldean Empire. They have suffered greatly and endured much in Babylon, and the prophet’s proclamation that the time is coming when they will be returned to their homeland and their beloved Jerusalem is without a doubt received with almost inexpressible gratitude and relief.

It’s going to be a new Exodus, like when Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt centuries before; only this time, it will be God’s own spirit leading the march of liberation out of Babylon and across the wilderness to the Promised Land. They can hardly wait to pack their bags and get back home to the way things used to be in the good old days!

II. But Isaiah’s message to the Babylonian exiles does not begin with “Prepare the Way!” It begins with consolation, with calming words of forgiveness and healing, reassurance and reconnection:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that
her suffering is over, that her separation is past,
that her sins are remembered no more.*

You see, bad things tend to happen to people when they alienate themselves from God. They lose their moral bearings and their sense of right and wrong. Their hearts harden

towards other people. They grow careless of things that really matter, like gratitude, and humility, and promise-keeping, and prayerfulness. They try in vain to exclude themselves from God's word, God's help, and God's love. They even begin to think that *they* are the awesome center of the universe and the light of the world: little gods unto themselves.

And that's exactly what actually happened in Jerusalem of Judah *before* the exile. People turned their backs on God. They abused God's prophets and ignored the wisdom of their great religious tradition. They sought only their own personal enrichment and treated the poor with contempt. Instead of trusting God, they put their faith in arrogant and ignorant leaders, deceiving allies, and vain-glorious armies to save them in this doomed war with invincible Babylonian. But they were divided within themselves, soul-sick and spiritual starved, weakened by greed and injustice, and estranged from God. King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian war machine crushed them like insects!

So God knows that before anybody dashes home to Jerusalem there needs to be some comforting and consoling done: some wiping away of bitter tears and healing of old wounds; some reassuring words of forgiveness and reconciliation; some restoration and renewal of relationships; some tender hugs and pats on the back. God and God's people need to reconnect and go home together.

III. Isaiah is also the Old Testament prophet who foresees most clearly beyond the distant horizon the coming one day of a Savior who will embody the spirit of God, and who will deliver and redeem his people by the power of love alone. It is to prepare for him a way to our hearts that this season of Advent is devoted.

And not unlike those Judean people of Isaiah's generation, we today may have our own Babylons to get over. Some of us need to let heal the wounds of long-past spiritual warfare. Some of us have experienced exile or exclusion and need to be reconciled and welcomed home. Some of us need to forgive and be forgiven. Some of us need to re-set our compasses and reconfigure the way forward. Some of us have tears to shed on God's shoulder. Some of us are ready for a word of consolation, comforting, and reassurance. Some of us just need to be held for a while in the tender embrace of God's blessed acceptance.

Then, finally, in the miracle of redeeming love, we too will find the way prepared that leads us inward and homeward to Bethlehem and the advent of the Incarnate One, even Jesus Christ; and we will never be quite the same again. As the poet has said:

*We are making ready, Lord.
Our hearts are hillsides listening.
Our minds are hastening footsteps.
Our bodies are a cradle.
Our whole being is praise and rejoicing.
And unto you be the glory, O Word made flesh,
in whose peace we are secure,
in whose mercy we are forgiven,*

*and in whose love we are redeemed,
forever and ever. Amen.*

~ Arnold Kenseth