

Advent 2, December 6, 2020

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Theme: "Hiding Behind the Tombstones"

I was once told a story by a Lutheran pastor who had grown up as a pastor's kid in Nazi Germany. His father presided over a funeral for a Jewish man. The man who died had lived in their village, and with the Jews being moved into concentration camps, and rabbi's being afraid to be out in the open, there was no one to bury him so Pastor Knapp's father, a Lutheran pastor, volunteered to perform the service.

Sadly, no one came to the funeral. They were too afraid. It was a cold and dreary day and the drizzle fell on the pastor and the two grave diggers as the deceased was lowered into the earth. The pastor spoke words of hope and comfort to no one but the grave diggers who leaned on their shovels and smoked while the pastor "did his thing." He preached on Isaiah 40 and spoke it in Hebrew, "Nacham, nacham ammi amen elohikim – Comfort, Comfort my people says your God." He proclaimed the power of Christ, the Messiah, the one this text promises would come to rescue Isaiah's people one day. He prayed the Lord's Prayer and gave the benediction to himself if to no one else. The grave diggers had lost interest and wandered away during the message.

The pastor was very troubled by this forlorn event. I know how he felt, because I too have led funerals where the only people present were the funeral director and myself. The pastor stayed until the grave was filled in and the grave diggers left just because it seemed as though this person ought to have someone witness his final committal. He was after all a loved child of God even if he had had no faith in the Messiah who came and was damned in his place. Now all alone, with the sun beginning to sink, the pastor began walking through the cemetery toward his home. Suddenly there was movement in the corner of his eye and the pastor whirled to his right, startled out of his pondering. There stood a Jewish man beside a tombstone. Soon others stepped out from behind various tombstones. The friends and family of the man had been there all the time hiding behind the tombstones. They hid because they did not know if they could trust this pastor, but when they heard him speaking Hebrew and particularly those words from Isaiah – they found the courage to step out from behind the tombstones and show themselves.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are lots of Law and judgment. God charges his people with idolatry, unfaithfulness and ambivalence. So, they knew why they were going into exile, but nevertheless, God did not want them to live out their exile in hiding.

He wanted them to step out boldly and proclaim who they were and to whom they belonged. And that is why the rest of Isaiah was written.

“Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

You and I are much like the people to whom Isaiah spoke. We are much like those Jews hiding behind the tombstones in Germany. We too are in exile. We are alien people living in a foreign land – like the people of God in Babylon – like the Jews living in Nazi Germany. But God has no intention for us to spend our lives in hiding. In Jesus’ time, there were probably some who thought that John the Baptist should have hidden and saved his neck, but, how could he? He was a child of God given a message to proclaim. Was his message foreign? YES! He was a foreigner to the rulers of his day. Is our message foreign? YES!

Advent is our season though. Like that pastor back in 1942, we stand in this graveyard of a world and proclaim the love of Jesus Christ to people who seem sometimes not to even be there. We proclaim the Kingdom of God and it often seems as though we are shouting into a howling wind. But there are many, many people out

there hiding behind the tombstones and they don't know if they can trust us. Will we love them? Will we accept them with all of their troubles, all their warts, all their sin? Or will we shut them out when we see them in the light?

Advent is our season. The Messiah is coming for us and we know it. He is coming to gather us together and restore us to the place we lost when Adam and Eve fell into sin. He is coming to bind up all our wounds and wipe away our tears and reunite us with everyone we have ever loved and many who loved us, but we perhaps did not even know it.

Advent is our season to proclaim comfort to the world, to let our love flow to all people and to remember that our God has already restored us through the blood of his son. "Nacham, nacham ammi amen elohikim."