

# The Comforting Face of God

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Isaiah 40:1-11  
II Peter 3:8-15a  
Mark 1: 1-8

In liturgical time, Advent is the season that we pay attention, that we look and wait for God. This year as we wait and watch, with the Psalmist we say — “Let your face shine.” Last week, the first Sunday of Advent, we watched and waited, but God’s face seemed hidden. We wondered with Ezekiel if it is even possible to see the face of God in the dry bones, in desolation. Paul Mosley, an MCC worker in Burundi and Rwanda, witnessed to the fact that even out of the despair of death, God can bring new life, we can see God’s face.

This week we look for the comforting face of God. In our texts today, God is not hidden; the face of God is very present, a comfort. It is not that everything has been fixed; that all of our problems have vanished. But Isaiah tells us that God comforts us. God is coming near; a path is being cleared. A voice, a loud voice, announces, “God is coming, prepare the way.”

How do we get ready for such a thing? Welcoming God? The voice in the wilderness says that dramatic steps are taken to make the new highway; mountains are made lower, valleys are filled in. Leveling mountains? Environmental destruction? We immediately think of dynamite, ear splitting blasts, earthmovers, tunnels through mountains. Is this what the prophet means?

Isaiah says there are high places and low places. They will all be made even when God comes, so God can come among us. These are radical changes, earthmovers or not. It might be difficult, it might be painful, it might even be messy. But the consolation is that God will be with us in it.

Isaiah uses images from nature: valleys, mountains, rugged places and plains depict the changes that are coming, the preparations that are made for God. The writer of II Peter uses other illustrations — loud noises and fire from the sky will get our attention. What we think is reality will simply dissolve away.

And then we have the passage from Mark telling us that the voice that Isaiah spoke of, the one that calls in the wilderness, is none other than John the Baptist. He comes proclaiming that it is time; God is approaching. In this passage from Mark, John does not say that cataclysmic events will occur, though dressed as he is in camel hair and eating honey and wild locusts he does seem to be practicing for calamity. Like Isaiah and the writer of II Peter, John calls for repentance, and John offers this through baptism. But while Isaiah and Peter describe changes in the natural world that prepare the way for God, John says it is more personal. He doesn't mean making the rough places of our body more plain, no tummy tucks or Botox needed. What he calls for is simpler and at the same time more complicated than a face lift or stomach stapling — an inner change of heart.

Change of heart or change in landforms — there is a clear and consistent message throughout these scriptures; God is coming, watch and get ready. But let's be clear: God is not coming purely to change things on a whim. This is not

exterior decorating, “hmm, I think that I would rather have that mountain over there for this next thousand years — or maybe just a day.” No, this is change associated with justice; this is change that will be painful for some and good news for others. This is God at work and we will not be left alone. God will be with us. God will give comfort.

To have life as we know it change, to have the whole landscape change, is disorienting. To make the Rocky Mountains into the flat Kansas plains, this is as disorienting as being taken into captivity — which is what happened to the people of Israel and essentially what happened to the Jews in Jesus’ time as they came under Roman rule. When you have been in captivity, a voice calling in the wilderness saying that things will change is a comfort. Then to be assured that it is God that is comforting us, as we go through the time of tumultuous change, is even more astounding.

Comfort. Take Comfort, my people. How do we offer comfort?

Marilyn Robinson, in her book *Gilead*, describes what it looks like when church people offer comfort. John Ames is an old man, a life-long preacher in Gilead, Iowa. He has been told that he has a heart condition and does not have long to live. He laments leaving his young wife and their young son, but does what he can to protect the congregation from the knowledge of his impending death. One day he wakes from a nap to discover that his family has received a delivery. He writes in his journal:

*“Since supper was three kinds of casserole with two kinds of fruit salad, with cake and pie for dessert, I gathered that my flock, who lambaste life’s*

*problems with food items of just this kind, had heard an alarm. There was even a bean salad, which to me looked distinctly Presbyterian so anxiety had overspilled its denominational vessel. You'd have thought I'd died (p. 127)."*

Often when we want to show comfort we are at a loss for words. Or words are inadequate or superfluous. So we resort to casseroles, even bean salad depending on our tradition. We hope those that we imagine need comforting will understand food as a symbol for the care and comfort that we long to give.

The God of Isaiah does not bring food. Isaiah's God speaks "comfort" even before acknowledging there is trouble. This passage from Isaiah 11 begins with a word of comfort and ends with a description of what that comfort looks like. Over and over again in the biblical text, we are given the image of God as shepherd when comfort is needed. This time the shepherd not only leads the sheep by still waters. God the shepherd carries the little ones and leads the mother sheep. This is the God that walks with us, guiding us all the way.

For Isaiah's listeners this was a recognizable, tangible image: God as shepherd. For us it seems almost esoteric. II Peter gives us language that is at least more familiar even if we aren't sure exactly what it means.

Lead lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God. We wait for new heavens and a new earth, where justice is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

I understand in here a call to wait and watch for God and as we do, we are to comfort each other. We seek the new heaven and new earth by practicing justice, by striving for peace with ourselves, with each other, with the world. It is not only God that walks along side, guiding us with a voice of comfort. We must walk with each other.

But what does that really look like besides casseroles and pies in times of trouble? It is with passages like this, with ideas like God as comforter, that I long for something that fits the reality I live in. What does it really look like for God to comfort us, what does it really look like for God to guide us and carry us?

What is God's comfort? If we have not experienced true comfort from God or God's people, if we don't know God's comfort we are vulnerable to those things that promise false comfort. We seek consolation and company in shopping, alcohol, drugs, food, money and power over others. Though some of us may seek comfort in not having power, in allowing others to make decisions for us, in negating the power we do have.

Because we are human we seek comfort with our bodies, in our bodies. We want to experience God's comfort in our skin. We might do this with a handshake, with a hug or kiss, a back rub or more. We cannot underestimate the comfort we can experience in physical love, though this too can sometimes be a false comfort. Too often we have separated the spiritual love of God from the physical love and comfort we experience in our bodies. And if we have not separated God's love from the physical, we at least have the good sense not to speak of it.

We can break that pattern. We can learn to speak of bodies as good, of mutual and respectful physical love as holy. Physical love and care can give us comfort and show us the face of God.

The comforting face of God in these scriptures is directly tied to setting aside our own ego and recognizing God's power. Isaiah speaks of this by reminding us that all flesh is like grass; people fade and wither like the flowers of the field but God stands forever.

II Peter tells us that our time is not God's time, a thousand years is like a day to God. God has a different reality than we do. God is all-powerful, not people.

John the Baptist comes preaching repentance, an inner renunciation of ego, with a baptism of water that signifies the forgiveness of sin. And yet even John the Baptizer recognizes that what he offers is nothing compared with what Jesus offers in the Holy Spirit, a whole different kind of power and comfort.

The comforting face of God is not quite as elusive as the hidden face of God, but it is just as mysterious. May we stay alert to the ways that we can offer comfort to others in this advent season. May we be aware of the way that the comfort of God is offered to us, in voice, in geography, in spirit and in body.