

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 4, 2011

COMFORT MY PEOPLE
Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
~Isaiah 40:1

Good morning.

It is the season of Advent once again and I humbly admit that one of the challenges of preaching in this time is to find something fresh, something new to say from texts made familiar by frequent use. Consider for example, the text from Isaiah that Cate read for us. Who can think of this reading without hearing “comfort ye, comfort ye, my people” from Handel’s Messiah sung in a crystal clear tenor’s voice? At first, it may seem to us that a text like this has been worn so thin it sounds quaint, just another decoration for the holiday season. Closer examination, however, reveals that in fact it is a bold declaration about the character of God offered to a demoralized people. At issue here is the situation of God’s children, the people of Israel who have become numb, afraid and hopeless under the thumb of a Babylonian god who has invaded their land. It is hard for us to imagine their misery, unless we think of peoples of the world in our own time today that share a similar agony. Stripped of the institutional structures that shaped their lives, their temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, the people of Israel are languishing, indeed in need of a good word of comfort from fear and despair.

This particular text represents the exquisite poetry of an anonymous prophet known as Second Isaiah and emerges in the decades after the invasion of Judah by Babylon like a healing, life-creating, life-giving song. It seeks to bring back to life a people seemingly crushed under a shroud of death. Today’s reading is also a sharp contrast to this Babylonian disaster presented in other biblical books that generally accuse the people of causing the catastrophe by rampant sinfulness. While there could be some merit there in its own right, the Isaiah reading this morning shifts the conversation in a radically different direction and puts aside blaming, accusing speech, bursting out instead in a lyric poetry of comfort, hope and joy. And while concerned with the people of Israel’s interests, the anonymous prophet nevertheless imagines a nation restored, a city rebuilt, and a people reunited.

We had the privilege on campus this week of welcoming and hosting not an anonymous prophet, but a clearly visible present day and named one in the extraordinary woman of Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. As the 2011 Office for Religious Life Rathbun Visiting Fellow on *What Leads to a Meaningful Life*, she gave a lecture in Memorial Auditorium on Wednesday and reminded us “democracy is not a spectator sport.” When asked to compare the Occupy Movement to the Civil Rights Movement, she praised the publicity the movement has given the economic gaps in American society and said that “major transformation is possible if enough people are willing to get out of their comfort zones and demand change. If you see a need don’t ask why doesn’t somebody do something, ask why don’t I do something?” Ms. Edelman exemplified in her own prophetic voice the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to remind us about the failure to use our great wealth as a nation to make sure that everyone had the basic necessities of life. She

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focused her remarks on Wednesday in particular about the need to redefine success in America.

I was also reminded of the timeliness of Ms. Edelman's visit preceding the recognition of World AIDS Day this past Thursday, December 1. She has lobbied for the rights of children in Washington D.C for 18 years and understands the reality of the HIV epidemic and its impact on children. That number increases each year – currently it is estimated that there are over 16 million affected worldwide, and while the majority of these children have escaped HIV infection they have not escaped becoming orphans. It is estimated that in 2-3 years there will be more orphans as a result of the HIV epidemic than there are adults living with HIV. The severity of this orphan crisis may not be on the radar screen of large organizations and for that matter most of us. In an essay by Dr. Arthur J. Ammann, President and CEO of Global Strategies for HIV Prevention, Marian Wright Edelman was cited to say and stated so clearly: “Orphans need advocates because they cannot advocate for themselves. I am convinced that the new direction will not come from inside the political process. Politicians love to make speeches about families and children, but when they get back to Washington and budget battles, kids are the last to cross their minds. Kids don't vote. And political leaders respond to three things: threats to their reelection, potential embarrassment in the media, and the promise of campaign contributions. Children don't make campaign contributions, and many of their parents are too busy struggling to make ends meet to get involved in campaigns. If change is to come, it will happen because people like you respond in an aggressive, sustained, and even outraged way.”

Growing up in the south as an African American, Marian Wright Edelman learned core values of social responsibility and despite all that she has witnessed and endured as a young woman and now in her role as a modern day prophetic voice and advocate, I marvel at the resiliency, buoyancy, and tenacious hope and compassion she possesses in her soul. Her own life and upbringing prepared this Presidential Medal of Freedom winner – our nation's highest civilian honor – to improve the lives of those around her, that to which she is tirelessly committed to this day.

This holy season known as Advent, along with Lent, is recognized as a time of preparation for our lives personally and collectively. During Lent we accompany Jesus into the desert where we face the wilderness of our own inner landscape. As the gospel of Mark illustrates today, during Advent we go with John into the wilderness to prepare the way to welcome the Christ into our hearts and lives anew at Christmas. We have the opportunity to explore the inner geography of our own lives for areas of dead wood, thorns or tangled knots. Twisted relationships, the dead wood of old hurts or habits, the confusion that sometimes comes when we feel we can't see the wood for the trees – all of these are wilderness areas that need to be cleared away before new life and growth is possible. Perhaps there are desert patches – arid, dry areas where nothing can grow or blossom, parts of us which have nearly withered away from not being used or tended to or tested – some tenderness, some care, some talent, some forgiveness, some humor – that need the water of life to bring them bursting into bloom.

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As we consider our current holy season and our scriptural texts on this 2nd Sunday of Advent we ask ourselves: And who is this message for? Is it just for Israel at a particular time and place? Is it just for believers as we formulate our understanding of Jesus' life and ministry? Or are these texts and season saying something more – about God's compassion for all? And who is to bear this message? Is it only for angels, priests or prophets, anonymous or known?

Consequently, at this time of year we may think of ourselves as only recipients of words from on high. We cast ourselves as shepherds who hear the choirs of angels broadcasting a startling announcement of God's coming – Emmanuel – God with us. Yes, surely it is comforting to hear these words again and again, to be reassured that the God in whom we trust does indeed honor promises and covenants. Nevertheless, it is very hard to grasp that in the midst of such current national and worldwide duress. And likewise, to be honest, as a member of the clergy, as a practitioner, a leader and advocate of religious community and tradition – I also wonder about the future of organized religion in general and both the nature, relevance and impact of its witness. There is some discomfort in that for me. But regardless, I still find great comfort, and perhaps many of you do too, during this time of year when we can yet hear, sing, pray and speak to one another in the timeless language of divine consolation.

To be sure, any uneasiness we may feel either individually or collectively pales in comparison with the degree of suffering that God's words of comfort intend to address. They are not just to savor like food at our holiday tables as good as that may be. More so, we are in the situation of the anonymous prophet in the text, trying to find a way to speak them to others that God loves. A question that leaps up from the Isaiah text in verse 6 is "What shall I cry?" Presumably it is the prophet's voice, trying to understand how to formulate the message that God intends. The prophet uses the imagery and phrases of the time to proclaim that God's glory has been, is being, and will be revealed in the natural order and in the unfolding of human history, a dramatic display of God's certain compassion, comfort and care for those who receive it.

To those not tuned to or even interested in divine language, maybe even to some of you here this morning or listening on the radio – this message sounds downright preposterous. Today it seems evident, given our current national and global condition that the stronger god of the reigning empire has defeated this God being touted. Militarism, consumerism, religious zealotry robs us of lives and international respect, demands more of our resources and environment, pits one image of God against another and leaves the human community cynical and fractured. How dare you or I speak of a God who promises to be present in a way, to quote Isaiah, "that all people shall see it together."

But this is precisely what we are being asked to do. In the face of ridicule and indifference, we are yet called to speak of this God whose fierce compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the other gods who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships and the world around us. I am mindful today of the juxtaposition of both anonymous prophets like Second Isaiah and known prophets like Marian Wright

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Edelman who aid us in finding our voice, overcoming our objections and discovering the courage to speak words of comfort and hope to anyone who feels abandoned by God that somehow God will and does arrive in gentle power.

In this season of Advent, the point of making straight in the desert a highway for our God as the Isaiah text today suggests or making paths straight in the gospel of Mark reflects a theological perception. That is, God and the ones who manifest God's love, compassion and comfort are very proactive. They come after people. People do not have to search them out. The good news of Advent to me is that while we hear timeless promises spoken and sung once again, while we wait, prepare and ultimately welcome Emmanuel, God is with us, working on us, for it is there, in the desert, in the wilderness – a place of revelation and revolution – it is there we wait, we learn to live, not only for ourselves, but for others.

So come, Emmanuel. Come. Settle into our living for awhile and do not let us settle for too little.

Amen.