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Last week's readings urged us to be watchful and alert in order to be ready for the coming of the Lord. Those readings reminded us that during Advent we wait on multiple levels, as we commemorate both the waiting that accompanies the birth of a baby, and also the waiting we all live in as we hope for the return of Jesus the Messiah. This dual waiting of memory and anticipation is embedded into Jesus' earthly life, as narrated by the Evangelists. Today we hear from Mark's gospel (next week we'll hear from the gospel of John, and Advent IV is from Luke), and fascinatingly, the focus is not on Jesus per se, but on the one who announces him: John the Baptist. John the Baptist is both the herald that we need to welcome, and also the model of one who waits.

Now, I have to admit, one thing that has always struck me about JBap is that...well, gosh he must have been one crazy guy! "Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey." (Mark 1:6). I wonder if the Evangelist struggled with the image of John the Baptist too, because the writer prefaces John the Baptist's arrival on the scene with a quote from the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" This has the effect of providing scriptural coordinates for John the Baptist, anchoring him within a rich prophetic tradition, and establishing him as the new Elijah to Jesus' Messiahship. On the surface, it could seem like the Evangelist has simply paired John the Baptist's appearance in the wilderness with Isaiah's reference to a messenger appearing in the wilderness. After all, when John the Baptist speaks, he does not say, "Prepare the way of the Lord...", as in the prophet Isaiah, but rather, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals...". So is the connection just based on the word "wilderness"? I think there is more here than simply midrashic word pairing, and to tap into it we need to turn to the reading from Isaiah.



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This reading from Isaiah comes from Isaiah 40, the chapter that, according to biblical scholars, begins what is known as Deutero-Isaiah, or Second Isaiah. Deutero-Isaiah was probably written during the very last stages of the Babylonian Exile, when the Judeans were nearing the end of their captivity. Chapter 40 is an abrupt shift from the previous 39 chapters, in which Isaiah of Jerusalem warns successive kings against alliances with Assyria and Babylon, and urges the Kingdom of Judah to trust in Yahweh alone. Instead, chapters 40-55 are a triumphant celebration of God's sovereignty, beginning with this beautiful oracle of "glad tidings" in Chapter 40. Here, the prophet jubilantly describes how the return to Jerusalem will be like a new Exodus; the path will be smooth and God will gather the people as a shepherd gathers the sheep. The impression is of ease and safety, the promise is of return and hope, and the image of God is of abundant presence and liberation. In short, comfort, as the prophet proclaims so confidently at the beginning.

By repeating it twice, the prophet wants us to consider this word, "comfort". This is the instruction from the Lord: Speak comfort to my people. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem. Tell her that the time of exile – understood by the prophets as a period of purification of Israel – is nearly over. Now, my own sensibilities struggle with the idea that God would exile a people to teach them a lesson; I think the exiled Judeans would have been exiled anyway, and remarkably held onto faith in Yahweh. Nevertheless, I think there are deeper truths here, truths about how losing the habit of placing God at the centre of our lives can lead us to make decisions that cumulatively render us into a state of exile, where God and comfort seem far away.

The challenge is that we are bombarded by other promises of comfort every day. Take a moment to consider where, this week alone, we have seen this word, "comfort", and what was it trying to evoke? Was it an ad for a car interior? A pair of shoes? A lazy boy recliner? Comfort food? Comfort TV? Comfortable lounge wear?



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When we think about it, the promise of comfort is on par with the promise of youth and fitness. Comfort is BIG BUSINESS. In fact, there is a whole trend centred on hygge, a Danish concept of cosiness and safety that cultivates a sense of comfort. As corporal beings, we crave comfort, and as someone who routinely wears sheepskin moccasins, I am not exempt! Thus, this made me think: what do we associate with the word “Comfort”. Is it warmth? A full belly? The embrace of your parents? The loving trust of a beloved pet? Or is it less physical and more spiritual...perhaps the ease that comes when anxieties and grief are finally reconciled?

I am curious about the Prophet Isaiah’s use of this term to announce the end of exile, and my curiosity stems from the fact that life in Exile, by most accounts, was not horrible by the end of it. For a Judean living in Babylon, it was like moving from the Tundra to Florida. Babylon was fertile, lush, and Judeans eventually did well there. So, what can Yahweh mean by instructing his prophet to announce comfort to the people? The Hebrew word for comfort is one of those words, in the sense that it has more than one meaning depending on the context. However, I like to think of these words not as a contextual either/or, but rather simply evoking more of one sense than the other in a given situation, but still preserving the wholeness of meaning. And so, it is curious and perplexing that the word for comfort, from the Hebrew root Naham, also can mean “repent”, or better, “change of heart”. How fascinating.

Before the exile, that is, before the people found themselves away from the holy city and the Temple where God’s presence was believed to dwell, prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah had warned that if the people did not return to God (shuv), they would be separated from God. Amos goes so far as to predict that the people would experience a famine, not of bread or water, but of hearing the Word of the Lord (Amos 8). When the Babylonian exile finally did happen, it wasn’t just the removal of people, it felt like God’s very self had departed from Jerusalem. “How lonely sits the city that was once full of people,” the book of Lamentations says, “How like a widow she has become” (Lam 1:1). All of the prophetic exhortations to repentance and a return to God had seemingly come to nothing. For the ordinary Judean, it would have seemed like Yahweh had abandoned them, that Marduk, the god of the Babylonians was supreme, and that the promises and covenants they had depended on were in fragments.



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And yet, it was precisely during the Exile that the Judeans came to their greatest insight of all: that God was not simply the greatest of all gods, but rather God was the only god and no other gods existed. This radical return to God during a period when every social experience would have suggested otherwise was thus both a source of comfort and an indication of a revolutionary change of heart. The people awakened to a relationship with God that was not bound by geography or external obligations, but was “written on the heart” (Jer 31), and it was, therefore, unbreakable. The comfort announced by the prophet Isaiah entails both the joy of being able to return home, and also the awareness that a new relationship with God is unfolding.

When we join John the Baptist in the wilderness, he is proclaiming a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Normally, Jews in the first century would have had to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem to perform the necessary rites for a sacrifice to atone for sins. John’s baptism, especially for those living far away from Jerusalem, makes repentance and forgiveness more broadly available. Would this have been repeated? His announcement of one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit indicates that a permanent, totally life-giving baptism is soon to come. This baptism will not need to be repeated: a believer baptised into the Holy Spirit will be in a restored relationship with God, one that offers comfort. When Jesus finally appears in Mark’s gospel, the first words he speaks are “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:14). Jesus’ announcement of good news, of the inbreaking of the reign of God, includes within it the call to “repent”(metaneo), a word that meant to change one’s mind, to reconsider, to repent. And this Greek word is used several times to translate the Hebrew word used by Isaiah, naham, the word that could mean both comfort and repentance.



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As we step closer to the celebration of Christmas, I invite all of us to consider where we find comfort, true comfort, in our lives. Do these areas of comfort also bring us closer to God? Can we extend these experiences of comfort into moments of renewal of heart, where we draw from the rest that comfort provides in order to heal our relationship with others, and thus invite them to share this comfort? It is amazing to think that every gesture to help others find comfort – through a phone call to check on a friend, by doing someone's laundry or cooking dinner – in fact are moments of deepening relationship with God, and therefore of repentance/comfort for ourselves. Let us pray for the grace to seek and give comfort as we live in between times of the fullness of the reign of God.

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