

“Comfort, Comfort” (6Dec2020)
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

“What can I say?” Isaiah asked. “The people are grass. The grass withers.”

What does God say? “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

This word stood for ancient Jews exiled in Babylon. It stood waist-deep in the Jordan River for those coming to be baptized. It stands now. This word keeps repeating and extending itself. As our UCC siblings assert: God is still speaking. Because we need it, need it repeated and reiterated and renewed.

For us, for our limits, with Isaiah I ask “What can I say? The grass withers.”

Is it a seasonal realization? We’re done mowing the lawn. The bounty of the garden is put to bed. The flowers of the field have dried up, our beautiful prairie become brittle. Life, fragile and brief to begin with, dissipates and disappears before our very eyes.

I’m sorry these are such hard weeks. I don’t know that everybody’s feeling it, but I’ve sure heard an uptick in the sense of difficulty at this stage in the pandemic. So if it’s you, you’re not alone. You’re not alone in your worry, not alone in uncertainty, and in loneliness not alone.

I continue to hear of a breaking point, that you’re Zoomed out, worn out, worn down. Withering. I listen to laments and sorrows and having-had-enoughs. I’ve heard about choices of coping mechanisms, and whether we label those good choices or bad, still it’s trying to cope, groping and grasping for help. I hear you’re tired, and hear of fatigue—not at precautions but at the whole thing. I’ve heard reminders can be painful; for some it’s too much to see this room and know what is missing and is missed. I’ve heard your efforts, your wishful thinking, your trying to make it through.

Even if that’s not where you want to be, you know it. The online Epiphany choir rehearsal the other night was full of smiles at the chance to see each other and sing rich notes from Gustav Holst,

like our closing hymn today. Yet it was capped with tears, tears at the limited opportunity, and tears for those missing: Roger Pettersen in the hospital, Mary Maxwell’s lungs no longer capable, Bob Sessions’ low notes absent, and any of those who just weren’t up for it.

The grass withers. And I’m sorry. The grass withers and the flower fades. If Isaiah could’ve added oratory fertilizer, a speech to perk up the greenery, I’m sure he would’ve. If I could encourage you and energize you and just tell you to buck up and bide your time, by gum I’d give it a go. Yet Isaiah and I plead, “What can I say?”

The response comes: “The grass withers and the flower fades, But! the word of our God will stand forever.”

Last week, Jesus declared “heaven and earth will pass away, but [his] words will not pass away” (Mark 13:31).

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God spoken to us, for the Word of God in Jesus, we say:
thanks be to God.

This Word of God that will not pass away, standing forever, Isaiah spoke for exiles, far from home and from their worship lives and far from freedom. God had a message for them then.

Still, as if Isaiah’s prophecy was to predict 550 years into the future, this Word we may presume applied most primarily about John the Baptizer, preparing the way of the Lord, a voice in the wilderness.

Further still, into your home, exiled from familiar life and from your freedoms, this word that stands forever is speaking to you, for you.

God recognizes the difficulty, the need. The grass withers. The people’s constancy fades. And yet the herald doesn’t bring a dirge or song of sad sacks, doesn’t remain in silence with nothing to say, but heralds good tidings!

Another herald, John the Baptizer’s people carried the dual burden: the internal weight of life gone wrong, of sin, and the external oppressions of struggling under empire and whims of uncaring leaders. The grass wither, either under inclement weather or without more of its own ability.

So John and Mark brought good tidings, good news, the gospel of the victory that arrives with Jesus, preaching to transform hearts, to know forgiveness—from feeling you're wrong and not enough, to unburden and unbind, to free you. Neither powerful forces within or outside have the final word.

Listen as the word of our God comes again and again, comes to you, to your life, to set you free, to take on flesh in you.

Comfort, comfort, so says our God, and comfort, comfort God brings.

Comfort, comfort; in Greek the word “paraclete,” naming the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, sent by Jesus, who comes to abide with you and wrap around you.

Comfort, comfort; a holy breath to fill and enliven and inspire you, a wind at the beginning.

Comfort, comfort; the withering is not the end.

Comfort, comfort; mourning under sorrow's load, your tears are justified, and are also consoled.

Comfort, comfort; your wrongs are forgiven. Your shortcomings do not continue to define you.

Comfort, comfort; the things that hurt and steal life are not the ultimate picture. No death is forever.

Comfort, comfort; there is a new beginning. New things come to birth.

Comfort, comfort; new life comes.

Comfort, comfort; patiently, through all of this, God is bringing you to salvation.

Comfort, comfort; we ourselves cannot get in the way, nor can anything else.

Comfort, comfort; there is a way in the wilderness, a way back.

Comfort, comfort; God is a way-maker.

Comfort, comfort; for all peoples, all the earth.

Comfort, comfort; peace on earth. Peace be with you.

Comfort, comfort: it stands forever.

Comfort, comfort, so says our God.

For the Word of God in scripture,
for the Word of God spoken to us,
for the Word of God in Jesus, we say:
thanks be to God.

Hymn: “Comfort, Comfort Now My People”
(ELW 256)