

Isaiah 40: 1-11
Creekside COB
December 7, 2008
Advent 2

“The Comforting Face”

A movie premiere will take place this Friday, December 12. “*The Day the Earth Stood Still*” will open in Cineplex’s across the country, and I’ll be in line for a ticket. I *may* bring Sue with me. I enjoy science fiction, and it will be fascinating to see the new production while remembering the original made back in 1951. In “*The Day the Earth Stood Still*” an alien visits earth as kind of intergalactic prophet with a dire warning to the citizens of earth. “*If you do not change your ways and learn to live in peace, your planet is doomed.*”

I once had a disturbing dream with a *sci-fi* theme. To help you identify with the dream, let’s say an alien spacecraft lands at Elkhart’s Recreational Vehicle Hall of Fame. The aliens look like us, except for another pair of arms at the ears. I ask them an obvious question -- “So.... where are you all from?” The second question is one humans have asked since our brains developed the capacity to wonder. Does God exist? Is there proof? Do *you* believe in God?” The leader asks, “Are you sure you want to know?” “I think so,” I reply. “Very well. Five billion years ago, when your planet was barren, without form, and void, we conducted an experiment. We brought life to earth -- microbes, microorganisms, bacteria, dinosaurs, bears and Beluga whales. Much later, we brought you here in a Petri dish and released you into the wild. We made you and put you here. We have determined that your species is hopeless, and have come to conclude the experiment.” “But what about God?” I cried. With a wry smile their leader said, “*WE* are your God.” What an awful dream.

Has this unsettling question ever struck you out of the blue or startled you from sleep-- "What if God is fiction? What if God is only a human construct -- an otherworldly projection of an ideal father figure? What if the wonder-filled story of God making a human of himself and tucking himself into a manger is just a quaint, sentimental, tall tale?"

A similar thought has occurred to many preachers who stand at the pulpit on Easter Sunday. "What if it never happened? What if Jesus' body was stolen after all, and the resurrection is nothing but an elaborate hoax? What if I've wasted my life passing along a myth that is little more than false consolation to those about to take their last, sweet breath?"

Everyone who takes Christianity seriously knows faith isn't always rock solid. Faith isn't the absence of doubt. We drift in and out of the promises of God. Most of the time we act like God's *frozen people* instead of his *chosen people*. The earth stood still the day God descended to Bethlehem, and we find ourselves speaking in unison with the man who confessed to Jesus, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief."

This is Advent. It's not a prelude to Christmas. Advent calls us back home to God. Advent tells us what is of worth in the world, and what isn't. Advent is a precaution to build on a Sure Foundation -- not something stuck together with spit and sealing wax. Advent knocks us off balance. The Jesuit priest and anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, "*To live in God is to accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.*" Advent says God will make good on God's promises, not us. Therefore we must relinquish control and live in trust.

But I will fail my pastoral calling if I don't mention Advent *comfort*. Most people recognize the words, "*Comfort, ye my people,*" from the aria of George Frederick Handel's, *Messiah*. The text is from Isaiah 40: "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...*"

Isaiah had a daunting task. God told him to preach hope to people who had lost hope. In 586 B.C. Babylon conquered Israel. Jerusalem was ransacked. Those who weren't killed were carted off to exile, especially the leaders and the young. Babylon wanted to remove all possibilities of Israel getting a new start.

Israel lost its identity as God's people. They lost the land God promised their ancestors. They lost the temple, their center of worship. Where had God gone? Had God slipped out a side door when no one was looking? Was the exile God's punishment? Comforting people who had been grieving seventy years was daunting, but add to that those born in exile that were comfortable in captivity. Babylon was an impressive place. It was the center of power. It had spectacular architecture. Its hanging gardens were one of the world's wonders. Babylon had its own religion. It was a seductive society, like ours. Adopting Babylon's values might improve their lot, but at what cost?

"Comfort, oh comfort my people..." Isaiah said. "Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell them they have served their sentence. Their sins have been forgiven. They been punished enough." These aren't words of a wrathful, vengeful, God who gets perverse pleasure from kicking his children when they're down. "It's over and done with," God said. Meet the God of steadfast love and mercy who King David praises in the Psalms. I love how Kathleen Norris puts it: *"God's strength is, and ever has been, patience and forbearance."*

The comfort Isaiah promised didn't mean, "comfortable." We are in a society that worships ease, convenience, and comfort. Sitting in a Lay-Z-Boy is comfortable. A belly-full of comfort food is comfortable. Surrounding yourself with excess is comfortable. Not having a worry in the world is comfortable. You get home from work, kick off your shoes, lay your bones by the fire, crack a cold one and watch, *Dancing With the Stars*-- now that's comfortable.

The comfort of God is the constancy of God. When the world's foundations quake and crack we turn to the promise -- God is our refuge and strength... Bless the Lord, O my soul. Don't

forget his benefits. He crowns us with steadfast love and mercy from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 103). Times like these make us vulnerable and unsure. We scatter every which way to find a stable place to stand, and we learn the God of comfort is also our shepherd who finds us, picks us up, and holds us in the shelter of his love. When we're afraid we hold on tight to the promise of God's son, *"I won't leave you orphaned."*

Both passages from Isaiah and Mark talk about "preparing the way of the Lord." In those days, a royal visit required sprucing up the road into town. Holes were filled. Hairpin curves were straightened. New plants and shrubs lined the road. I lived in South Bend when the Special Olympics came to Notre Dame. One benefit of hosting the big event was that it motivated the city to repave the main thoroughfares and fix the potholes.

I know a civil engineer from a company that builds and repairs Wisconsin's state and Interstate highways. He said he could design an Interstate that would last at least 125 years. The chief drawback? It would cost \$24 million a mile! "What about cheap projects?" I asked. "They're called, *election specials*," he said. Politicians up for re-election get quick capital improvements for their districts. The *election special* is spraying the road black and painting fresh lines on it.

Prepare the way of the Lord, make a straight highway for God. Uneven ground shall be level and the rough places, smooth (Isaiah 40: 3-4). It isn't just the road to town we're talking about--it's the road to the heart. Isaiah and John tell us to clear the clutter that prevents us from welcoming Jesus into our lives. Get rid of the grudges. Get over the old hurts, get close to God who knit you together, and get on with your life. Pay a visit to Bethlehem then step outside your comfortable little life and serve him by serving people who need him. Tell them that *tidings of comfort and joy* aren't just words of a carol, but a presence that can shape their lives.

Psychologists have identified something called, *"cognitive dissonance."* It is the discomfort we feel when holding two or more beliefs, attitudes or actions that are incompatible with each

other. I tell you, “I’m swearing off on sweets, than I eat a tray of creampuffs. You say, “Cigarettes will kill you, and then you light one up. There seems to be dissonance in our scripture.

A voice says, “SHOUT!” And I say, “What shall I shout?” “The people are like grass, their love fragile as wildflowers. The grass withers, the wildflowers fade, if God as much as puffs on them,” (Isaiah 40:6-7).

Johannes Brahms also used Isaiah 40 in a composition called the *German Requiem*. Handel used comfort, but Brahms used verse 7: “*The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it...*” It’s poetry that says nothing tied to humanity is permanent. “The economy is fundamentally sound,” a candidate said. Kingdoms and corporations rise and fall. Bridges collapse. Buildings crumble. Rust, mold, and decay consume our treasures. People don’t like visiting hospitals and nursing homes. It brings mortality up close.

Here’s some advice. I wouldn’t base my hopes upon human achievement if I were you. The same goes for human ingenuity, creativity, and smarts. As far as the human spirit goes, it’s highly overrated and hasn’t done much to make us hopeful about our prospects.

I love Christmas, but a melancholy time for me. It is sad to know that I cannot go home for Christmas. Santa’s house hasn’t been at the Court House for years and years. The manger scene isn’t there either. The elementary school where I made decorations that adorned classroom windows and walls for six years was torn down. The creamed chicken sandwiches and cherry tarts Grandma Bibbee made on Christmas Eve for our family gathering -- it’s a memory. Most of my extended family that gathered around the Christmas tree ay grandma’s is gone now. I’m down to one aunt, and she recently asked me to conduct her funeral.

The longer I live, the more I appreciate that old hymn, *Abide With Me*:

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day.

***Earth's joys grow dim, it's glories pass away.
Change and decay in all around I see.
O thou who changest not, abide with me.
(Henry Lyte, 1847)***