

The Only Constant: *Isaiah 40:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, December 6, 2015, Advent 2, Year C - Following Narrative Lectionary and "Tradition! WDS series"

"Where do you think you're going? Nobody's leaving. Nobody's walking out on this fun, old-fashioned family Christmas. No, no. We're all in this together."

That's Clark Griswold, toward the end of National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, which is, in my opinion, the best Christmas movie ever.

It's so good because everything goes oh so wrong. All Clark wants is for a perfect, fun, old-fashioned family Christmas, just like the ones he used to know. But the problem is, Clark can't control the chaos all around him. His parents. The in-laws. Cousin Eddie. The Christmas tree burns up. The turkey is overcooked. Clark's 250 strands of Christmas lights won't turn on. The Christmas bonus never arrives. Everything goes wrong. And Clark, who wanted nothing more than the perfect Christmas, loses it.

His wife, Ellen, tells him, "Clark, I think it's best if everyone went home... before things get worse."

"Worse?!" Clark says. "How could things get any worse? Take a look around you, Ellen!"

I imagine Clark isn't the only one to ever feel that way, this time of year? Sometimes, it doesn't matter how hard we try, that perfect, Old-fashioned Christmas never comes.

This time of year is so steeped in Christmas traditions, but when things change, when the season is disrupted by the chaos all around us, it's hard to imagine Christmas ever being the same way again.

Maybe the kids can't come home this year. Maybe mom's no longer there to make your favorite dish. Maybe there's no snow, or too much snow, or not enough money to buy the kids what they've asked for. Maybe you have to share the kids with your ex, or with the in-laws.

Every year, more and more doesn't go right. More and more changes. Traditions, that we once held so dear, that brought meaning and comfort, are crumbling before us, and we wonder, "How could things get any worse?"

Our text today comes to us from deep in the tradition of the Israelites. And yet, it comes at a moment when everything they had held onto, everything they had known and loved, everything familiar and meaningful, had been taken away from them.

The Babylonian Empire has invaded the Kingdom of Judah. The temple has been destroyed. Most Jewish families were forced to leave their homes and become captives in the land of Babylon. Their customs and traditions all threatened.

Without the temple, where was their God? Without the land, where was their safety and comfort? How could they go on with their lives? How could things get any worse?

But just when they were on the brink of despair, God sends a prophet.

Up until this point in the book of Isaiah, the news has been bad. Prophetic words of judgement given as explanation for the pain the people suffer. This is punishment from God, the prophet proclaims. This is what you have earned.

When life begins to fall apart, this is where we usually turn. It's our fault. We deserve this. We've brought this onto ourselves. How could we ever expect to have any comfort and joy? Look at the mess we've made of our lives!

But here, in chapter 40, the book of Isaiah takes a different turn. In fact, really, this is the beginning of a different book. We don't really know who wrote Isaiah, but scholars do know that what we call Isaiah is not one book, but actually three books. First Isaiah, which contain the words of the prophet Isaiah, written at the beginning of exile. Second Isaiah, which was written anonymously in the midst of exile. And Third Isaiah, written after the people had returned home. One book, written by three different people at three very different times, times too far separated for one person to have written them in a lifetime.

The first Isaiah is doom and gloom. There's glimmers of hope, but Isaiah's message is judgement. But things take a turn in chapter 40 with second Isaiah. This prophet is the preacher of Good news, and our text this morning is his first words to his congregation:

"Comfort, Comfort my people, says our God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

The words are surprising. Jarring. The normal message of judgment and blame is nowhere to be found. Here is a word of hope. A word of peace. A word that cuts through the pain of the moment, and promises something new...something we thought was no longer possible: comfort.

This is a word we need to hear this Advent.

Terrorist attacks. Mass shootings becoming normal events. In schools. At clinics. At work. At home. San Bernardino. Colorado Springs. Syria. Paris.

Is there anywhere we can feel safe? How can we find comfort in times like these, knowing that the worse could happen at any moment?

Terror is the enemy of comfort. It takes away our illusions of safety. It causes us to shut off from others. After all, who can you trust? The stranger may be the next suicide bomber or mass shooter. It's not worth the risk. Best to blame all Muslims. Distrust anyone who is different, and arm yourself to the max. Better safe than sorry.

Terror is the enemy of comfort. But the prophet speaks into our terror, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

The comfort God is bringing is not fake and sentimental. It doesn't need old-fashion Christmas traditions to work. It doesn't need an army or political party or an arsenal. It doesn't need anything or anybody.

For the grass withers and the flower fades, and all these things, our traditions, our illusions of safety, everything and everyone we trust in--they are like grass. They wither. They cannot be expected to bring us the comfort we need.

But there is good news for people in exile. These things we have lost, the hurt is real. The traditions that are gone, they leave a hole. But our comfort is found in none of these things. Our comfort, our hope, our peace is found in God. And God doesn't need a temple or tradition or anything or anyone to bring us comfort.

Once we stop looking at everything that is not-God to save us, then we will find our comfort in the only one who can save us.

It is only after we have lost these idols of safety and tradition and self-protection, and everything being perfect and just the way it's supposed to be--only then can we begin the hard work of preparing for God to come. Only then are the mountains of indifference brought low, and the valleys of fear leveled off.

And right in the midst of our uncertainty and terror, a highway of peace is paved, for the Prince of Peace to arrive and take us home.

And this is a comfort that will carry us through whatever chaos life brings our way. This is the comfort that will carry us through the bedside of a loved one who is sick. This is the comfort that will carry us through the graveside of a child who died too early. This is the comfort that carries us through the pain and transitions of life, through divorce and grief and job loss.

It's not a comfort that always promises to fix everything. But it is a comfort that is always there, even after everything has faded away.

When everything else fails at saving us. When everything in life forsakes us. When there is nothing left to do, and we think it cannot get any worse, God is there. God is the only constant, and God will never leave you nor forsake you.

So climb up on a mountain, Church. Lift up your voice, O people of God. Do not fear; say to the people, "Here is your God!; See, the Lord God comes with might, and God's arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. God will feed his flock like a shepherd; God will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.