

Isaiah 40: 1-11
2 Peter 3: 8-15
December 7, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent

In the passage we heard from Isaiah, God commissions the angels to comfort his people who are in exile in Babylon. By the Holy Spirit Isaiah hears this message and proclaims it to God's people. I like this image. God sends his angels to comfort his people. Isaiah's role is to announce that God has done this. It is not Isaiah's job personally to comfort God's people. His job is to alert them to the fact that God has commissioned his angels to bring comfort.

During this season of Advent this is our calling as well. We now are Isaiah, overhearing God's charge to the heavenly beings. This calls us to three specifically spiritual activities which we see at nearly every railroad crossing: *stop, listen and look*.

Perhaps the most important thing we can do in this or any season is to **stop!** Our culture is so fast paced, pressured and driven by outside circumstances that we do not even notice. We tend to schedule our lives right up to the last minute. Then what happens when something takes longer than we planned, or there is a traffic jam, or someone cuts in line?

This fast paced life not only guarantees a state of perpetual tension, we become slaves to the beat of the outside world. We are driven by forces beyond us; and so we experience life as beyond our control. We are in perpetual reaction, not only to immediate events but we grow to dread the future.

God's solution is and has always been for us to *stop*. Get off the merry-go-round. He calls us to "be still" and come to know again that God is...well, *God*. This rat race we are in has nothing to do with *God's* life. God's invitation to us is expressed in the prayer I have on the wall

in my office: “Good morning, this is God. I will be handling all your problems today. I will not need your help. So relax, and have a great day.”

God created the Sabbath as a day of *rest—a day of stopping*. God know that when we stop trying to make everything work in life we discover that there is a power greater than ourselves which is up to meeting our needs. We remember all the times God has been faithful to God’s people and in our own lives. This perspective allows us to do the next most important thing: to *listen*.

Only when we have *stopped* being driven by life and taken deep breaths and started to relax in God’s presence can we be quiet enough on the inside to *listen* and recognize the still small voice of God’s Holy Spirit. Only when we have quieted our hearts and minds in prayer and meditation can we begin to sense what John Greenleaf Whittier called “the silence of eternity interpreted by love.” Only when we have begun to attend to the silence within us and around us can we recognize how the world draws us to the lights and sounds within and around us and distracts us from the silence which lies at the heart of God. Only then can we begin to appreciate that silence of Divine love is the true reality which beckons for our attention.

The Hebrew word translated “comfort” does not mean to make feel better or to reassure. It means literally to “give forth sighs.” This is a powerful image of divine *presence*. True love does not give advice or theological explanations. True love is the offering of compassion—of being with a person or community that is in need. God tells the angels to comfort by giving forth *sighs* of love, understanding, commiseration and compassion. It is from these sighs that we know that God is with us; we are seen and loved. When we realize that we

are safe in God's presence our anxiety diminishes and we can begin the practice of *looking* for signs of God's help and direction.

The killing of unarmed African American suspects in Missouri and Staten Island offers evidence of the critical need for people of faith to *stop and listen*. *Stopping* allows us to recognize the power of the pull apart world which splits us into two groups: those who defend the police and blame the victims and those who attack the police and portray the suspects as innocent victims. *Stopping* helps us to recognize that there are far larger forces at work than these incidents. These are the same forces which have been pulling apart the world since the beginning of time. They have power to control us because they direct our attention to the particular incident and blind us to the big picture.

When we stop and recognize these polarizing forces we can then *listen*. We can hear the cries of people who experience that they are not protected by the equal enforcement of justice. Yet we also hear the cries of law enforcement officers asked to go to dangerous situations having to make split second decisions. And we begin to hear God commanding his angels, "Comfort, comfort my people."

When we stop and listen to our own fears and begin to hear the fears of others we begin to *look* for the presence of Jesus in the midst of the rage and fear. We begin recognize that God sends comfort by "bringing forth sighs" of compassion and yearning. We begin to look for opportunities to be communities which receive the compassionate sighs of God and which breathe out those same sighs into the community around us. In short, we look and find Jesus the perfect expression of God's love and compassion for the whole world. And we find in Jesus

the reason why God is not going to come at any time soon to save the righteous and destroy the wicked. As Peter writes, God is “patient”. God does not want anyone to be destroyed.

And so the question becomes in this Advent season, “How shall we become a community of healing, a safe space for the fearful and brutalized?” Again, quoting Peter,

...what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for *and hastening* the day of God?

I propose we will be people who *stop* in order to *listen* so we can *look* to Jesus so that we can look for the comfort God has sent in him and become that comfort in this frightened and broken world. Amen.