

A Humble Comfort
Advent 2B, Isaiah 40.1-11
December 6, 2020
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There's an early stage in sermon preparation, at least for me, when one of the readings hopefully exerts some kind of pull on the imagination, and possibly brings up a question or connection from the past. This week, when I read Isaiah 40, what came to mind was not Handel's "Messiah." It was a book by Wendell Berry called *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*.

It was no small miracle that I found a coffee stained and heavily underlined copy of the book pretty quickly on my office shelves. And, since it was a hard cover, an inspection of the copyright page suggested that I would have first read it around the year 2000. I was working as a carpenter then. And our kids would have been about one and four. Which meant I couldn't stay awake much longer than they could in the evening, so most of my reading happened before anybody else got up in the morning, first coffee in hand, waiting to be spilled, sitting in the sagging old swiveling thrift store chair Ardelle would sing the children to sleep in.

None of this is directly relevant to anything Wendell Berry or Isaiah had to say. Except that such details fix the book vividly in a moment of my own history. And part of Berry's worry is that we live in a technological age that is obsessed with progress and the future and that has less and less use for the wisdom of the past, especially when it comes from "premodern" or "prescientific" folks. Like the prophet Isaiah, for example.

It seems somewhat relevant that this particular memory of mine is of a time when our children had only recently arrived in the world and therefore didn't know very much about it at all. Especially compared to all they know now as young adults. And, as young parents, Ardelle and I had a lot to learn in the years to come as well. Why would I even bother to consult a twenty-year younger version of myself for insights into anything since the up-to-date, seminary educated, one-time-parent-of-teenagers-who-lived-to-tell-about-it me is now available?

What got Wendell Berry worked up enough about our diminishing of the wisdom of the past to write a book about it was actually another book. One titled *Consilience*, by Edward O. Wilson. In it, Mr. Wilson says fairly bluntly that people in prescientific cultures are, quote "wrong, always wrong." He also says, "Without the instruments and accumulated knowledge of the natural sciences... humans are trapped in a cognitive prison. They are like intelligent fish born in a deep, shadowed pool." And, finally, "No shaman's spell or fast upon a sacred mountain can summon the electromagnetic spectrum. Prophets of the great religions were kept unaware of its existence not because of a secretive god but because they lacked the hard-won knowledge of physics."

Wendell Berry says it's only courteous to ask whether anyone else has ever thought knowledge of the electromagnetic spectrum was necessary to the vocation of a prophet. He imagines a tiny play, replete with stage directions, as follows:

Isaiah (finger in the air and somewhat oblivious of the historical superiority of the modern audience): “The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as of the flower of the field.”

Edward O. Wilson (somewhat impressed, but nevertheless determined to do his bit for “evolutionary progress”): “But... but, sir! Are you aware of the existence of the electromagnetic spectrum?”

Curtain.

That’s the bit Isaiah 40 brought to mind all these years later for me. For the record, Wendell Berry is not opposed to the electromagnetic spectrum and is quite happy about many of the things its discovery made possible. He’s not opposed to human progress, but he thinks our faith in progress above all else is the superstition of our age. And his plea is not for less science or less knowledge, but for more humility. So is Isaiah’s.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God...” How many Advents have we returned to the prophet’s words, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke all use to describe John the Baptist? He’s the one sent to prepare the way. He’s the one whose voice cries out in the wilderness. And the sense we probably take from this prophecy is that our comfort comes from the knowledge that God is coming. And coming, presumably, to make things better. Because that would be comforting, wouldn’t it? If God came barreling down a wilderness highway to make everything that’s wrong with this world right? Or even just everything that’s wrong with me?

But this is not what Isaiah describes. In fact, all that sounds a little like a religious version of unbounded faith in progress. What’s actually promised in Isaiah 40 is that God’s glory will be revealed and that people will see it. All people will see it together, the text says. How many progressive people like us think the comfort we need is a bigger dose of divine glory?

And then the voice speaks a second time. And this time it tells the prophet to do the crying out. Isaiah says, “What shall I cry?” And this is what he’s told to say: “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”

It seems our part in finding the comfort in Isaiah’s announcement is in admitting our mortality. Resting in, rather than resisting the fact that human lives are short and small and that we are creatures of limited knowledge and limited understanding. “The work of our soul is cut short,” said Jeremy Taylor, “facile, sweet, and plain, and fitted to the small portions of our shorter life.” The soul’s work, you see, is actually made for lives the size of ours.

And the good news of Isaiah is that it is to small portioned lives like ours that God comes. Fading flowers and withering grass that we are, we can see the burning glory that has made us. The burning glory that still fires all creation and each human life with sparks of the sacred. It’s not something we can fully know or prove. It’s not something we can even remotely control. But we can awaken to it and find true comfort in the fact that our mortal lives live within such glory. That such glory finds lives like ours worth visiting.

There’s just no lasting comfort in the illusion that just a little more time or knowledge will save us. And the illusion is not new. We’ve believed a form of it in all of the 27 centuries or so since Isaiah, and somehow our knowledge is still not quite enough, is it? We don’t know enough to make the world or even our own small lives entirely whole. Look around. Read the headlines. Have we cracked the

mystery of how to live as fully flourishing human beings, living in just and merciful communion with one another?

And, like you, I scan the news every morning for the latest on the COVID19 vaccines. And what an astonishing gift it is to live in an age when science can save the lives that it will in the months and years to come. But science can't tell you what to do with the life it's just saved. Our wisest scientists are as humble before this mystery as our prophets. Often humbler.

Which is why this Advent I invite you to spend a little less time anticipating, no matter what you've been told Advent is all about. I invite you to spend less time anticipating whatever it is you think will finally make you whole, whether it's more time or more knowledge or more progress toward anything at all you don't think you have enough of. Instead of yearning for some other life or even for a Messiah you hope will come barreling through the wilderness to give it to you, this Advent, practice the liberating humility of Isaiah. A humility that rests on resting in the miracle of the one short life you've been given.

For the Christian story is that some essential facet of God's glory was made to be revealed in lives of humble human proportions. It is to ordinary lives like yours and like mine that the Messiah still comes. Might the work of our souls, then, be to be present to them and to the humble lives around us as fully as we can when he does?