

## **Long enough**

Isaiah 40:1-2

January 11, 2015

A mentor once told me that it is a minister's job to comfort those who are disturbed and to disturb those who are comfortable. So which are you? Comfortable or disturbed?

The people of Jerusalem were disturbed. They had been disturbed for a long time: disturbed and beaten down and hollowed out and sucked dry of hope and desire beyond anything we are capable of imagining. But let's try. Let's try to imagine what it was like ...

Imagine that thirteen and a half years ago, it was not just the Twin Towers, but the entire city of New York that had been reduced to rubble.

Imagine that this was done, not by a small group of trained terrorists, but by the military apparatus of a powerful and ruthless nation.

Imagine that it was not just New York, but Boston and Chicago and Washington DC, too, all left devastated and uninhabitable.

Imagine that the Capitol building was razed, and the White House and the Smithsonian. Imagine that original copies of our founding documents were burned, Arlington National Cemetery desecrated, and members of all three branches of government either killed or carted off to prison camps.

Imagine that you were taken, too, with your family, if you were lucky. Or maybe that is not lucky at all. Maybe you wished it had just been you!

Imagine that you were all taken away from your homes, forcibly relocated to a tent city in the mountains of Afghanistan, where you will make what life you can not for six months or one year or five years, but seventy years.

Seventy years! So long that you die and it is your children and your children's children who live now in this barren and forbidding place that is the only home they have ever known. All they know of home, of your homeland, of this beloved country of ours, are the stories that you tell them, the stories of how it once had been.

And now imagine that your prophets, your ministers, the men and women among you doing their best to listen still for the voice of God in this bitter place ... imagine they keep telling you it is your fault!

*“Comfort my people,” says our God.  
“Comfort them!  
Encourage the people of Jerusalem.  
Tell them they have suffered long enough ...”*

Long enough? Long enough? Of course. it has been long enough!

Are you bitter? Are you angry? But even so, wouldn't this be good news? God telling you, all of you, that you have suffered long enough?

Maybe we can understand this suffering, this long suffering, not the suffering that comes into our lives, one by one, by fate or misfortune or act of nature -- an illness, an accident, the loss of a job, the death of a friend -- but the long suffering of this suffering world of which we are all a part: killings in Paris, bombings in Baghdad, kidnappings and murders by Boko Haram, civil war in the Congo, in Syria, and Ukraine, endless war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Korea and Gaza, poverty in Nicaragua, in Haiti, in Sierra Leone, in Honduras, in Mexico, and in the United States.

And this suffering is made all the more painful because our prophets and our ministers are telling us that it is our fault, and we know that they are right! It is our fault, our collective fault, as members of the human race. We suffer and our neighbors suffer because of our carelessness, our misdirection, our neglect, our selfishness, our greed, our anger, our pride. We suffer ... because of sin.

*“Tell them they have suffered long enough  
and their sins are now forgiven.”*

*“Comfort my people,” says our God.  
“Comfort them!  
Tell them they have suffered long enough  
and their sins are now forgiven.”*

The sins of the people of Jerusalem were now forgiven. Their neglect of God. Their lack of trust and lack of love for God. Their empty worship which meant nothing when it came to the way they chose to live their lives. Their neglect of each other. Their disregard for the poor among them. Their blind pursuit of their own gain and their own pleasure. These and all their sins were forgiven. God was ready to do a new thing among them, to bring their long suffering to end. “Comfort my people. Comfort them!”

Have we suffered long enough? Are we ready to have our sins forgiven? Are we ready for God to do a new thing among us? Are we ready, eager, hungry and thirsty for a word of comfort?

Comfort my people. This will be our theme for the six Sundays of Epiphany, as we listen to the voice of the Lord in Isaiah 40 comforting us in the midst of our long suffering ...