

Farmville Baptist Church  
December 6, 2020  
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13, Isaiah 40:1-11  
Receive God's Deepest Gifts of Hope and Peace  
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“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” Most of us are familiar with these words. We hear them every year during Advent, especially if we sing or listen to Handel's “Messiah.” But this year, we yearn for them, don't we? Comfort, comfort my people. Kathleen O'Connor writes, disasters make people numb, afraid and hopeless, they undermine our faith in God and in the traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure.<sup>i</sup> Between the fires in California, the hurricanes in the Gulf Coast, and the pandemic, we've had more than our share of disasters this year. And many others around the world have had their share as well. We're tired and in need of comfort, in need of hope and peace.

This was certainly true for the people of Israel when these words from Second Isaiah were written. You may recall that in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Babylonians invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the temple, interrupted the economy and deported many of the leading citizens to exile or isolation in Babylon where they stayed for an entire generation. These words from Isaiah 40 seek to bring life back to a people crushed under the shroud of death.

Although the author imagines a nation restored, a city rebuilt, and a people reunited in Zion, the people are to find their joy not in these earthly things, but in God's unfailing word. Though all else fails, God's word endures forever, and God comes to take them home. The people are commanded to prepare the way of the Lord to build a highway, to level the rough places. Then when they are ready, the glory of the Lord will be revealed. (PAUSE) These are

powerful words to a community that felt that God at best was punishing them and at worst had abandoned them.

I love the image of God that we see in this passage. Verse 10 tells us that God will come with might ó not to judge or condemn ó the people have suffered enough, but to feed his flock like a shepherd, to gather his lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Comfort, O comfort my people. Like Israel in exile, may we receive God's gifts of hope and peace.

In Psalm 85, our other lectionary reading for the day, we find these words, "Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts." The peace the psalmist speaks of here is the word "shalom." While shalom speaks to the absence of violence and conflict, this peace is a comprehensive well-being that encompasses the fulfillment of every individual and corporate need as well as the health of the very world we live in. This peace is nothing less than the glory of God dwelling with the people in the land.

Did you notice that the vision in this psalm comes in **listening** to what God will speak? The salvation that this psalm speaks of is based on God's blessing, not on fear of divine judgment. The fear mentioned here is awe ó awe of God and God's active presence among us. Salvation is more than deliverance from our enemies or release from captivity, and it is not a one-shot deal. Rather, it is God's continued work in our lives and our world as we work out our salvation day to day. As this happens, steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, verse 10 tells us, and righteousness and peace will kiss each other. It is beautiful language that describes the world as God intends.

Scripture has shown us how God provided hope and peace to Israel so very long ago, but what does it look like to receive these gifts in our day? One of the most moving examples I read this week occurred in 2006, beyond our own faith tradition. That year, in the war between Israel, Lebanon and Hezbollah, an Israeli man named Motti Tamam lost two brothers in a Hezbollah rocket attack. Motti asked that his brothers' eyes become available for transplant. One of the recipients was Nikolas Elias, an Arab man. After the transplant, Nikolas and Motti — men on opposite sides of a bitter war, met, shook hands, and exchanged phone numbers.<sup>ii</sup> It's a beautiful story of loving your enemy that brings us hope.

More recently, and much closer to home, Terence Lester is bringing hope to those who are homeless during the pandemic. Terence's story began in 2013 when he decided to create an organization to support Atlanta's homeless community. He didn't want to make assumptions about the homeless experience, so in Dec 2013, he moved onto the streets to better understand the needs of people enduring homelessness. His experiences during that month now drive every element of his nonprofit, "Love Beyond Walls." He explains, "We're walking WITH people, not (doing) for people. We're not only trying to meet those basic necessities right now, but we're also forging relationships to be the guides and encouragers of people on their own journeys." As COVID 19 ramped up, those in the homeless community voiced fears and concerns about catching the virus and not having any place to wash their hands. So Lester started "Love Sinks In" a campaign to install portable handwashing stations in Atlanta and beyond. By the end of August, there were handwashing stations in 50 cities and 30 states. "Lester said, "There was this population of people across the US who were being forgotten, and we wanted to ensure they weren't." Lester is meeting real needs and bringing God's deep gift of hope

Did you know that CBF has a formal network called Together for Hope? Originally named the Rural Poverty Initiative, Together for Hope was formed in 2001 as a 20-year commitment to the 20 poorest counties in the United States, all of which are rural. From the beginning, Together for Hope has adamantly followed the practice of Asset Based Community Development because they are convinced that the key to alleviating poverty in these rural areas already exists with the people who are there. In 2016, they moved from the vocabulary of "rural poverty initiative" to "rural development coalition" in order to focus on the positive movement that they have always fostered. Through long term partnerships with local leaders, Together for Hope is now known as a force for the common good in rural America.

Currently, Together for Hope has 18 partners across the rural landscape of the US. Some of their partners are CBF field personnel, while other coalition organizations are their own independent non-profits. I want us to keep this in mind as we begin our own asset-based work here at Farmville.

One of Together for Hope's networks is right here in Danville Virginia where Joshua and Jessica Hearne lead Grace and Main Fellowship, an intentional and ecumenical Christian community. Based on principals of hospitality and inclusion, Grace and Main hosts community meals and worship services, offers a community tool bank and a large urban farm. They also work on social justice issues such as tenants' rights and fair housing. They are bringing healing hope, and peace to those often overlooked.

My prayer is that we, like Israel, will receive God's gifts of hope and peace this Advent season. I also pray that we will look for opportunities to share these gifts with others. We can do that in formal ways through our shoe boxes and Christmas food baskets, but I encourage us all to look for simple, everyday ways to share hope and peace as well. You can do this with something

as simple as a plate of cookies or meal a delivered to an isolated neighbor. You can do it through a phone call or a Christmas card dropped in the mail. You can do it by passing out gift cards to first responders and medical workers. The possibilities are endless if we are open and listen to how God may be nudging us. As we receive God's gifts of hope and peace, may we pass them on.

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<sup>i</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Commentary*, Year B, Volume 1, p. 27.

<sup>ii</sup> "Eyes to See" *Christian Century*, September 5, 2006, 6.