

Startling Comfort, Renewed Hope

Isaiah 40:1-5

By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

December 2, 2018 – Advent Week 1

Anticipating. Preparing. Reflecting. Waiting. Hoping. Praying. These are the actions of advent. A season first celebrated over fifteen hundred years ago, advent is a sacred season four weeks before Christmas meant to ready one's heart, mind and soul to praise and rejoice at the birth of our Lord Jesus. A season of potential and almost, a season of already and not yet. A season filled with hope, joy, peace and love.

As a season of new beginnings and possibilities, the days of advent have included many wedding ceremonies, including one for a couple long ago, on December 14, 1780. On this day, Elizabeth (Eliza) Schuyler and Alexander Hamilton became Mr. and Mrs. at Eliza's family's mansion in Albany, New York. On this day began a marriage that, like all marriages, had its share of ups and downs because of the unique pressures of being a political couple, because of the common stresses of raising a family that many of us have encountered or are in the midst of when one parent is away from home more than present.

Because, as most of us know from the extraordinary hit musical *Hamilton*, for all of his brilliance, charm and principled ideas, Hamilton was a flawed man. A flawed man 17 years married, he was worn down from being the first U.S. Treasury Secretary and by his responsibility to his family. He was a flawed man who, one summer night, was seduced by a married woman, Maria Reynolds. Once aware of the affair, Reynold's husband took advantage of Hamilton's vulnerability as a married, high government official and blackmailed him. Hamilton paid Reynolds and the affair remained their secret. But soon his political opponents discovered the payments Hamilton had been making and accused him of embezzling the government's money.

On August 25, 1797, Hamilton published the Reynold's pamphlet, a written confession to the long-term affair. With this publication, he simultaneously proved his innocence to his country and his guilt to his wife. With power, anger and lament, in *Hamilton*, Eliza sings these words from the song "Burn," explaining to Alexander how he has destroyed their marriage:

In clearing your name, you have ruined our lives. / . . . You have torn it all apart. . . . You forfeit all rights to my heart / you forfeit the place in our bed . . . I hope that you burn.

Burn. The relationship between Alexander and Eliza had been destroyed.

Burn. Their temple, their homes, their world destroyed, the Hebrew people had ignored the widow, sought evil and forsaken the Lord. They had replaced their faith in God for worship of their ancestors and centered their lives around their own selfish desires. The people angered God and God responded. In the first chapter of Isaiah, God's actions of destruction of Judah are vividly described:

"Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And daughter

Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city" (Isaiah 1: 7-8).

Led by God, the Assyrian army ransacked and burned Judah and destroyed Jerusalem, exiling all who lived there. The Judeans' ways of living ended, as they began a century and a half of languishing under the Babylonian god Marduk.

Written in the late 8th century, as the Assyrians attacked Judah, the first 39 chapters of the prophetic book of Isaiah, considered "First Isaiah," details God's disgust with the Hebrew people and the consequences for their evil actions. It is a dark read, one without good news. one without hope. one without comfort. It is so consistently dark that the words for us today, from chapter 40, are startling lights of love and relief:

Comfort, O comfort my people,
 says your God.
 2 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.

These words begin "Second Isaiah," written over 150 years after "First Isaiah." Contrary to the first 39 chapters, chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah reveal the good news of God's comfort and promise of homecoming to a people who have been away from their native land for seven generations. The Judeans were living in exile when God's words of comfort and hope were proclaimed. They had known their homeland through stories passed on from their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents. The only home *they* knew was in Babylon where they worshipped little "g" gods and assimilated into a foreign, yet familiar culture. They were far removed from the ancestors who sinned against God, the sins that resulted in their exile. Yet they were the ones who were forgiven these sins; they were the ones given God's comfort and hope.

Generations lived and died in exile, but exile was not the end of the Hebrews' story. God's judgment is always followed by God's forgiveness, mercy and hope. In the Hebrew people's case, it was hope for the future – a future in a home they had known only from stories, a home that, for the first time, would become a physical place for them, not only an irrevocable condition of being born a Judean.

The exiles would live in Jerusalem! They would worship their God with a capital "G," whose love is so fierce that no amount of the Hebrews' turning away, no amount of time, could quench it. This is a love laced with forgiveness and grace, a love that brings comfort and offers the future.

On November 24, 1801, four years after the Reynold's pamphlet was published and Hamilton was exiled from Eliza's heart, Eliza and Alexander's first-born son, Philip, was killed in a duel, bringing them unimaginable anguish. Hamilton's world was blown apart, never again to be the same. *Hamilton's "It's Quiet Uptown"* reveals how, in the midst of

the heartache and sorrow of Philip's death, Eliza offers Alexander startling hope of her forgiveness, forgiveness born out of love that brings comfort and offers a future.

The chorus sings:

*There are moments that the words don't reach
There is a grace too powerful to name
We push away what we can never understand
We push away the unimaginable
They are standing in the garden
Alexander by Eliza's side
She takes his hand
Forgiveness. Can you imagine? Forgiveness. Can you imagine?*

Still in Babylon, the Hebrews were trying to imagine life in Judah again – for the first time, with God. They must get ready:

“A voice cries out:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3).

As improbable as it seems, to return to a desolate land and make it home will happen, for the Lord has spoken. Even still in exile, the Judeans had to prepare a way for God, a way for them to go home. The God of their ancestors had not forsaken them but had forgiven them and the Hebrews would return! The temple would be rebuilt! They would live again! The startling comfort of God renewed the Hebrews' hope in what could be.

Startling. Unexpected. Odd. Awesome. Mind-blowing. These are descriptors of God with us, Jesus, who arrived as a wee one in a dusty stall, born to two refugees. The Gospel writers were at a loss to explain such a unique and unbelievable experience of God being born as a human baby, so they referred to scripture they knew, scripture that explained a similarly startling and comforting experience. It was that of the Hebrews who heard the words of “Second Isaiah” after more than a century in exile: “Comfort, O Comfort my people.” This is another experience of divine compassion, similar in its unlikeliness to the example of God's unprecedented love as Jesus enters the world.

“Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people, saith your God,” is how *The Messiah's* second movement begins. The music and sung words were almost audible on Tuesday when we studied this passage at the morning Bible Study. One member commented, “I can only hear the Scripture as it is sung in my head.” Many, many more people know this Isaiah passage not for being the beginning of chapter 40 in Isaiah, but for being the words in *The Messiah*. That same member said it is “the most powerful music in the world.” The most powerful music in the world is about the most powerful God, about the most powerful of experiences – divine comfort, startling comfort, renewed hope.

“Comfort, O Comfort my people.” If you are like me, you could use some startling comfort right now and some divine comfort to be a balm for the wounds caused by living in our uncertain reality. We are in a reality in which helpless children are fired with tear gas, a reality in which a police chief orders officers to arrest innocent people for committing burglaries, a reality where, in the U.S., hate crimes against Jews rose 37% between 2016

and 2017. These days, discouragement and distress seem to outweigh hope. We need our hope renewed.

“Comfort, O comfort my people.” God offers comfort to us this morning in a simple, satisfying, life-saving meal. It is a meal that is a proclamation of God’s hope – a hope that is never outweighed – for a world where those considered last and least are first and most, where violence is overcome by the power of divine love, and where all siblings work together for peace.

As improbable as it seems, friends, justice will happen, peace will come, love will prevail – for the mouth of the Lord has spoken, and Jesus has come and will come again.

Right now, we are Advent people. We anticipate. We prepare. We reflect. We pray. And, when we least expect it, we are startled by God’s comfort, so have renewed hope again for God’s coming among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.