



Longing for
the Light

WAITING FOR GOD
TO ARRIVE AT ADVENT

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

READING: PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13; ISAIAH 40:1-11; MARK 1:1-8

*Lord I beg and plead
Pull me to the light so I can see
To stop my questioning
So I can fall asleep*

*Questions weigh on me
Is it to be is it not to be
Is there a plan for me?
Or is God just an antique?*

The Ghost Club - Antique

*In the dark I learned to love again
A sacred place it's always been
Where souls depart and life begins
The dark led me to light again
Yeah, the dark led me to light again*

SYML - The Dark

These are excerpt from songs that top my recently played list. Both songs speak from a place of pain and turmoil. And they are songs that seem to reveal a crisis or a deep questioning from the artist. In the first one, the singer asks, in the middle of the night, if God is real. From a place of longing, he is asking for God to reveal himself-if he actually exists. In the second, the singer has almost embraced his journey through the darkness and back to the light, where love has been rediscovered. To me, both songs grapple honestly with the existential questions we all face at some point. As they name their darkness and look towards the light, they both sound like exile songs. Exile is composed of a sense dislocation and discomfort. Exile is being far off from where one longs to be. Exile speaks to some sort of rejection. These songs speak into that experience and are looking for comfort. These feelings resonate with me personally because their words have been my words, maybe all of our words. The words of these songs and the feeling expressed can help us understand this week's readings.

Isaiah 40 is a significant passage within the Hebrew scriptures. It begins by declaring 'Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.' It would be arresting in the most normal of circumstance to have God speak these words to you. But this passage does not reflect the most normal of circumstances. Isaiah 40 kicks-off a new section in the book of Isaiah, one that is speaking to the second aspect of the mission of the book, salvation. To oversimplify a large prophetic book, the first 39 chapters are 'old things' of judgement and the later 27 chapters speak to the 'new things' of salvation. This does not mean that salvation is absent from the first part and judgement from second, just that perspective has changed somewhat. Seemingly between the words of Hezekiah at the end of 39 and the words of Yahweh here in chapter 40, there is the entirety of the Babylonian exile and return. This could also be reframed to use the language from last week, between chapter 39 and 40 the deepest darkness Judah could have imagined happened and only now were they getting even a glimpse of the light.

This is the place from which the words of comfort from the Lord arises. Here is where the new thing of salvation begins. Here is where the Lord himself starts to speak and says it is time for comfort for his people. Beyond that, intimate care and tenderness is offered. The time of punishment is over, a new time is upon them. In light of everything that happened before to Israel, God is announcing his renewed purposes and reminding them once more of his faithfulness to them. It is an assurance of their salvation through the hand of God himself. Isaiah 40 does not present an indirect action of God or even an agent of God acting to bring deliverance, instead it presents a God who acts and a God who will be seen as he acts. We are told, emphatically, 'Here is your God! And 'See, the Lord God comes...' He comes with might and strength and intimacy and care. In the midst of the darkness that was the exile, he has promised himself as the response. He offered himself as their place and means of comfort.

This relates well to what Psalm 85 says as it also speaks of a God who comforts his people, forgives, pardons, restores them. It also presents a vision of imminent and almost realized salvation. The word usage speaks with urgency about this activity. Surely his salvation is at hand. And when it happens, it will bring about a place of perfect harmony. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss. It speaks to an idealized and perfect harmony where everything is as it ought to be. Again this speaks to a God who is actively and directly involved in bringing comfort to his people and seems to reflect the same post-exilic context.

Both these passages combine a God who acts with a preparatory element. They both anticipate God coming to do his work and good things following in his wake. Mark picks up this theme in his gospel but transforms it with a new element. Like Isaiah there is a cry from the wilderness. For Mark though, the one crying has become a messenger announcing a greater and more powerful one coming after him. The implication is that the expected arrival of God as comforter is to be understood in connection to the one for whom John is preparing the way. Mark includes a second quote, from Malachi, that suggests first comes the messenger, then comes God. When this happens, the expectations outlined in Isaiah 40 and Psalm 85 will find a new application and maybe even an ultimate fulfillment. The focus of Mark's Gospel as a whole is to detail and explain what this actually means.

Three passages, two boldly declaring comfort, one starting the process of having it realized. They are moving us from darkness to light, from the place that we are in to a place where comfort is realized. I think we long for this moment when God speaks directly to us and says, "feel comfort, show comfort or be comforted Mat, all the crap that you have experienced, whatever that may have been is over now. Your feelings of exile are finished and everything from now on will be characterized by harmony." Although the passages speak corporately, it is natural for us to desire for God to speak to us like this. It is human to long for him to inhabit the darkness with us, help us make sense of it and then overcome it. This is why we started in the dark, why we stood in the darkness of night waiting for the first sign of light. Because here with the first glimmer of hope, we knew that all our pain, sorrow and struggles would be dealt with. That is the hopefulness that Isaiah, the Psalmist and Mark all offer to their readers and to us. They tell how the exiles will be comforted by Yahweh himself acting for them. They show a vision of complete harmony again through God himself and his direct action.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

We all have moments of questioning or uncertainty, what questions do you have that keep you up at night (like the song mentions)? To what level have they been answered or resolved? Does it bother you that you may never get a full answer?

Is there a specific image that evokes being comforted to you? What about this image comforts you? Does this image translate at all to God comforting you?

