

Celebrate Advent and Christmas with Bishop Laurie Haller – Week Two: Presence

Grace and peace to you on this second Sunday in the season of Advent. The theme of our devotion today is Presence. Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 40.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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. A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

“A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 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 forever.

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah,

‘Here is your God!’ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

One of the most important gifts we can give to another person is our presence. To know that we have family and friends who will be with us and stand by us in difficult times is a great gift. That is one reason why this is such a tender time in our world. Precisely when we need each other the most, we are not able to worship in person, visit our family in nursing homes or in the hospital, or spend time with our friends. The resulting isolation can easily lead to anxiety, sadness, and depression.

In our scripture from Isaiah 40, the prophet is called to comfort his people who are suffering by speaking tenderly and announcing that their sins have been forgiven. Then he says that the Lord is coming, not with a message of separation, anger, or division, but with a voice of empathy, grace, hope, and presence. Isaiah announces that the presence of the LORD God is coming to save God’s people. For God is like shepherd who feeds the flock, carries the lambs in his arms, and gently leads the mother sheep.

Some of the most formative moments of my life took place when I was high school and sang in a number of oratorios at my church. We had an outstanding music program, and I was able to sneak into the adult choir with my father, who was often a soloist and could sing either tenor or bass. Handel's Messiah was and continues to be my favorite oratorio, and to this day I can vividly remember how the tenor soloist sings a recitative from Isaiah 40 at the very beginning, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Then the choir sings one of the most beautiful choruses in sacred music, "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain." Thanks be to God for the gift of God's presence to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain.

Let us pray.

O God, whose will is justice for the poor, peace for the afflicted, and presence to those in need, let your herald's urgent voice pierce our hardened hearts and announce the dawn of your kingdom. Before the advent of the One who baptizes with the fire of the Holy Spirit, let our complacency give way to conversion, oppression to justice, and conflict to acceptance of one another in Christ. We ask this through the One whose coming is certain and whose day draws near: your son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. One God, forever and ever. Amen.