

STOP THE CRYING

[written in oral form]

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8
Advent 2, Year B

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My sermon two weeks ago included the encouragement to live in the present / to live Now.

A small, but significant clarification should be made to that aphorism.
I think it is much healthier to live in the present,....yet living in the Now can be difficult.
Being content in the present moment can be a challenge,,when things are not going well.

When life is painful and fearful, then people need to have forward looking hope. In terrible times, we need to hope that relief is coming / that life will get better.
Living in a painful NOW, without hope, is not good enough.

Sometimes the anguish is personal, be it physical health, depression, anxiety or sorrow.
Sometimes the pain is broader, as we contemplate the way the world is trending, causing some to wonder if they should even have children.

Hardships and despair can last a long time,...or just a short while.
Either way,..... the present can feel eternal..... when life is painful.

I recall a flight I was on, a few years ago, that was very painful for most of the passengers. Across the aisle from me was a young mother with a very upset baby, and this baby had a strong and aggravating CRY.

At first, people tried to ignore the crying, but that didn't last long.
Some tried to block the crying with ear buds, but they really didn't help much.

Before long, there were some annoying glances, but when the crying didn't subside, they soon became frequent, piercing stares.

The mother was attending to her baby as best she could, but to no avail.
A couple of people went to her to offer suggestions,, but that didn't work. The intense crying went on and on..... for about 30 hours.
Well, maybe not that long....
Needless to say, it was a long and painful flight for the baby,.... the mother..... and for most of the passengers.

As you know, there are different types of cries.
Parents quickly learn to recognize the meaning of their baby's cry, and will respond appropriately, when possible.
*However, Getting out of a car seat or off a plane isn't always an option.
When traveling with Katherine as a toddler, we learned that when she started to make grunting sounds, we had less than five minutes to stop and free her from the car seat. The tempo and volume of the grunts*

would increase,.....THEN, unless freed, the crying would begin,.... and her cry had the power to open the gates of hell.

Babies are not the only ones who cry, and as I said, there are different types of cries. Some cries are a response / a reaction to a surprise or a hurt or a sudden affliction. Some cries are just venting pent up feelings or deep sorrows.

Most cries are a plea for help or relief. And, cries come out in different ways. They are not always audible. Some cries are “acting out”or... depression and withdrawal from people..... or destructive behaviour or tearful weeping..... or.....a from the soul plea for help.

The CRY mentioned into today’s passages is a soulful plea.

Some English translations use the word “Call” instead of Cry, in the Isaiah text, but a word study revealed that the Hebrew word suggests much more than just a “Call” / a request.

The Hebrew word is “Kaw Raw”, and is used in many places in the Old Testament. In Genesis 18:20 it is translated an “out crying” In Isaiah 8:4 it is used for a child “crying” out.

The CRY in today’s passages suggests a strong, from the soul, **plea**.

The Isaiah passage is for hurting people in exile and distress. Their homes have been destroyed; their place of worship is in ruins, and they are captives in a foreign culture, in a foreign land.

They are cogently aware of their past mistakes, and they feel that the lack of God’s intervention and activity is because of things they did wrong. So,.... add severe regret to their terrible feelings. That was their situation.

I’m sure, there have been times in our lives, when we have felt rejected, alone, isolated,.... with a sensation that God has abandoned us.
And, include with that..... helpless remorse.
In those times, life in the present is not good enough
Our cries may or may not be silent, regardless they are cries for hope.

More and more, I'm hearing cries from my friends in the US. They are extremely distraught about their political leaders.... and their culture asunder. They are feeling like captives in a foreign land. And, we are not immune to the toxic spread of fear and hate.

To all in dread and hopelessness, hear God's words from Isaiah:
“Comfort, O Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to them.

CRY TO THEM that their suffering is near the end.
The past is over. God is Not going to do punishment.
God will bring healing.

*Interesting: the message for the crying is a cry. ????

Subsequently,..... A Voice Cries out:
“In Your Wilderness..... Prepare / make ready for a God encounter.
God is about to do something.

Restoration, healing and redemption come from God,.... Yet....Hope begins when a soulful cry for help receives a shared, tender, comforting cry of empathy.

Lecturing or stating a solution to the hurting and broken rarely works.
Hope sprouts when a crying heart encounters..... another heart’s cry.

Strange as it may sound,..... but it takes a cry to stop a cry..... and when that happens, the path to God seems a little clearer..... a little more straight, straight as in the prophet’s imagery in verse three.

We know this..... We know the power of a shared cry. We all have experienced this before. Hurting and broken people can bring healing and comfort to the hurting and broken.

When two souls connect in such a way, it is much like lighting a candle in the dark; it makes the world get a little brighter.

And, with that flame of hope comes a renewed passion for self, for humanity and for God. We can see more clearly, and illumination inspires the pursuit of grace, peace and justice.

The next few verses in Isaiah paint a rearranging of the landscape:
of lifting up valleys and making mountains low.

This sounds like a picture of the prairies – all flat.
But, I know the words are not about Saskatchewan,..... because it mentions that the pot holes will be filled.
Verse 4 says the uneven ground will be made level.

As you know, this imagery is Not about landscape, but rather about doing justice. Here again, we have the recurring OT theme about “levelling the playing field” about doing jubilee..... giving everyone a fair chance. From the Bible, parity, equality and respect ring out like crying bells from a steeple.

When a person discovers soul filled Hope, true Hope, he or she wants to share that hope..... by doing justice, by allowing others the opportunity to Hope!

When hearts connect, when cries are shared.... the hope for the world beams a little brighter and justice happens by enlightened people.

One Candle in the night is an invitation, a cry of defiance against the dark.
Yet, when it is joined by another, and another, illumination begins, and healing, compassionate justice draws near.

Nevertheless,..... the Isaiah passage continues with the obvious message that we are weak and the world is very dark.

This is true, and we are wise to remember that the default mode of the world is “darkness.”
In the first creation story, all was in darkness, until God created light.

The life of **Christ followers** includes a constant lighting of candles in the dark. That is what we do.
We don't fight the darkness. **We light candles.**

Since the beginning, the world has never returned to total darkness, to be sure, we may have come close at times. Nevertheless, God is still at work through the hearts and passions of those who love and have hope. God is Active.

God breaks up the darkness. God breaks into the silence..... with a tender and comforting message in the form of a cry.

John the Baptist gave voice to this message.
Mark identifies the voice crying out, where as Isaiah left the voice “Unnamed”.

John the Baptist echoed Isaiah's words and added clarity to them.
He preached the message of repentance, and proclaimed that God was about to do something amazing—
God was about to bring God's love and grace into the world.... in a very personal way.

John's message was similar to the Isaiah passage; it was a invitation to hope.

John cried out. John cried to others with the invitation to cry in response.

True repentance begins with honesty. Repentance means a change of direction, which requires a change of heart, which follows open confession,.....and I really don't believe that can happen without the soul crying,... and there may be tears, too.

In other words, living with fear, regret and shame is merely a sad state of existence, with little hope.
Regret, fear and shame are symptomatic of holding the pain inside.
John's cry is a petition to cry – to open up and repent...to discover a new way--the way of illumination.

There is healing when a cry meets a cry, and with divine help, there is change—there is repentance, and there is hope.

John the Baptist cried out to others to respond / to open up and prepare for God's presence..... because God was about to do something amazing. The world was about to see the "Comforting face of God."

We really can't do Life alone. Merely existing is not living.
Guarding / protecting our true self / not sharing the soul makes for a harden heart, and that is truly a lonely way to be.

We need connection, real, honest connection, and that connection begins with a heartfelt plea for help.

A cry invites a cry, and it takes a cry to stop a cry.

This crying is at a Spiritual level. It includes, but is also much more than emotional intimacy.
Paul calls this cry a "groaning."

People are hurting. People are hurting in faraway places, and people are hurting in our country and community.
In the darkness of despair there is a cry for help, and today's message invites us to respond..... as God responds.

God responds to the cry for help by presenting the "Comforting Face of God."

We are in Advent. We are preparing ourselves for God's presence into the world and our lives.
And, that preparation includes..... spiritual listening..... Listening with our souls for the sound of a baby crying.

God's comforting face came into the world as a baby, and as you know, babies cry.

God's response to a cry for help..... is to join the cry with a vulnerable cry.

This is not to suggest we pull out the tissues and start bawling, but maybe?

Jesus was God's heartfelt, vulnerable reply to / for humanity.
God's love meets us at our greatest need – where it hurts– by joining us in the struggle with love. And, God's heartfelt cry for you and me is an invitation to respond – to risk sharing our soul, including our weaknesses and fears.

In practical terms:

Sadly, we adults have learned to build walls around our soul / our being, and those walls make dark shadows.

I think Babies openly respond to the spirit around them... that they feel and sense.

A frightened baby on an aeroplane is not comforted by feelings of selfish anger and resentment--the dark shadows.

Yet, too often that is the spirit we possess.

When peer out from our nicely constructed walls of correctness and crafted, righteous rational, we bristle in anger at the injustices we observe.

We tend to take offenses as a personal affront when our values are not honoured and respected.

It is disturbing to see racist, white supremacists on display.

It is painful and frustrating to hear about the rich getting richer, and poor poorer.

We get angry when women are not treated with respect,... and when LGBTQ people are not regarded as equals.

And, it's annoying when our dominate culture is slow to reconcile our past with indigenous peoples.....and the environment.

Let us stand firm against hate and injustice, but may we do it in honesty and with a humble heart.

Let us repent of the error that we only comfort our friends, and not our enemies.

We followers of Christ are not crusaders. We do NOT fight the darkness.

For from it,we cry and we light candles in the darkness.

Therefore, we can not / we must Not attack or provoke violence.

In honest humility, may we seek to see the wounds in the haters.

May we see the fear that drives the bigots, the corrupt and the greedy.

By the grace of God, let us attend, with love and compassion, to those ugly, abusive cries.

This is a call to be personal, intimate and honest, based on divine hope.

It is God's call to us: Comfort, O comfort my people.

Hope begins when we hear the plea of others, and respond in kind.

We are in the season of lighting candles.

Let us light Spiritual candles together..... keenly knowing that by so doing, the illumination will also allow others to see us for who we are.

Let's stop the crying..... by crying together.