

Reflection

November 19, 2020

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“I’m tired.” I hear this every day. I hear it from family caregivers who miss the opportunities for the much needed breaks they once had in the “Before Times” when people could come into their home to relieve them for a few hours. I hear it from the newly bereaved whose grief is complicated by pandemic-induced social distancing mandates at a time when they need to be physically close to those they love. I hear it from front line health care workers and teachers and therapists and pastors and activists. I hear it from parents who are desperately trying to balance their work with the needs of their families. Our collective weariness is palpable.

It’s not hard to see why. We’ve all been through a lot these past few months – actually, in these past few years. No wonder we’re tired. And yet, there’s still so much to be done on so many fronts. It would seem that we don’t have time to cope with fatigue. Something in us tries to keep pushing on. Where does that energy come from? Is it a sort of shared adrenaline rush? Is burnout right around the corner?

Perhaps. But what is also right around the corner is Advent, the season of ritualized waiting and preparing. In the weeks and now months before Christmas that our consumerist culture has trained us to view as a year-end buying frenzy and social whirlwind, Christians enter into a communal introspective pause. Observing Advent is a radical act that flies in the face of cultural norms. The social and economic sirens scream, “Hurry, you’ll miss the sale; you won’t find that in-demand toy that guarantees happiness. Try to fit as many parties as possible into your schedule.”

But the voice of Advent whispers, “Slow down. Look within. Take stock of where you’ve been and where you’re going. Ask yourself who you are and whose you are.”

One of the most beloved biblical Advent texts is Isaiah 40. One of the best-known phrases in the chapter is “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” I think it’s easy for Americans to read this and get a sense of being tasked with bushwhacking our way through the thickets, tackling a tough project. We love that sort of thing. Historically we’ve prided ourselves on our indomitable can-do spirits as we confront impossible situations. And confronting a myriad of impossible situations is what so many of us feel that we’ve been called to do over the past months and years. We’ve faced herculean challenges and felt compelled to create a path through hostile territory toward much-needed change in an unjust world.

And that is all right and good. But it doesn't tell a complete story.

Look at the words that open the 40th chapter of Isaiah, "Comfort, oh comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly..." Before the imperative to forge ahead in the wildest places comes a note of gentleness. "Comfort my people...Speak tenderly." Savor those words for a moment.

Comfort. Tenderness. They've both been in short supply lately. This is certainly true on social media and in what passes for civil national debates. It's easy to speak hateful, condescending, disturbing words, especially from a distance. It's easy, in such a divided ideological landscape, to throw verbal barbs into the ether. It's harder to do when you have to look a person in the eye.

As I navigate the harsh edges of our supercharged emotional environment, if I just sit with the words "comfort" and "speak tenderly" for a bit, something in me softens. I find myself breathing a sigh of relief, breathing more freely and evenly. It's refreshing. It's grounding.

In the coming Advent season we're invited to practice comfort and tenderness, right alongside the practice of making a new path through uncharted territory and preparing the way for the Light to come once again. This practice isn't a luxury, it's a directive.

As the howling voices of division and demonization of others drone on, we are called to comfort and to speak tenderly. This doesn't mean that we're excused from speaking truth to power or taking action for justice. It does mean that we're being urged to help turn down the volume. Afterall, important issues are rarely resolved in heated exchanges. It means that we need to listen to each other and treat one another with respect, comfort, and tenderness.

And we're called to treat ourselves with tenderness and kindness. When we're this tired, we need to find opportunities to rest and be refreshed. That means different things for each of us, from getting adequate sleep, to walking in the woods, to making music, to engaging in centering prayer.

We have a long road ahead of us. It's a marathon. Advent offers the opportunity to pause, rest, reflect and recharge as we engage in the on-going work of bearing Light in the darkness.

