

December 2, 2015  
Isaiah 40:1-2

Midweek Advent 1  
Comfort, Comfort Ye My People

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Advent King. Amen.*

It's beyond dark! It's beyond warm...but yet oh so cold. A cry rings out but no one hears it. Claustrophobia begins to set in...palms begin to grow sweaty...heart begins to pump fast and furious, breaths become harder to take, lips and tongue become dry. No one can hear the cries. No one will ever hear the cries or so one thinks. A feeling of complete helplessness, isolation. You might even feel like you are going to die. Perhaps that might be the scene of someone that has been buried alive in a coffin. Much like that of a woman in one of *Alfred Hitchcock's Presents* TV show.

This particular episode was about a female prisoner who became good friends with the prison caretaker. When a prisoner died he would ring the bell, get the body and put it in a casket and nail it shut. Then, placing the casket on a wagon, he would take it to the graveyard outside the prison walls and bury the corpse.

Knowing this routine, the woman devised an escape plan and shared it with this caretaker. "The next time the bell rings," she said, "I'll leave my cell and sneak into the coffin with the dead body. Nail the lid shut and take the coffin outside the prison with me in it. Bury the coffin," she continued, "and because there will be enough air for me to breathe for some time, you can come back to the graveyard that night, dig up the coffin, and set me free."

The caretaker agreed to the plan.

One day this woman heard the ringing of the death bell. She arose, and walked down the hallway, found the coffin containing the dead body and climbed in. Soon she heard the pounding of hammer and nails. The coffin was lifted onto the wagon and taken outside to the graveyard. After the dirt was poured on the coffin she began to giggle out loud, "I'm free, I'm free!"

Feeling curious she lit a match to identify the prisoner beside her and in the glimmer of light she discovered that she was lying next to the dead...caretaker. The final scene closes in Alfred Hitchcock classic way as we hear the woman screaming, screaming, and then...silence.

Imagine another scenario...this one a true story. You are out working in your yard...perhaps digging in your well, you lose your pick, and while working in the well your leg becomes stuck, soil begins to collapse around you. You begin to feel utterly helpless...you scream for help...the first few screams aren't heard...again as in the previous scene...your palms grow sweaty, heart begins to pump fast and furious, breaths become harder to take, lips and tongue become dry...and yet you scream some more.

Have you ever been buried before? Surely you have...and so have I.

We've been buried with questions...In one of Woody Allen's films titled "Love and Death," a cynic named Boris says, "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think he's evil. I think that the worst thing you can say about him is that he is an underachiever."

It does seem that way, doesn't it? God's program for the world isn't making a lot of progress; it doesn't seem as though he's achieving a whole lot. Just look around at all the suffering. So the questions arise...Why doesn't God put an end to starvation, poverty, and homelessness? Why doesn't God put an end to ISIS and war and terror? Why doesn't he alleviate my pain, my sorrow, my tears and the deep hurt inside my heart? If God sent Jesus to be light of my life...why am I in the dark?

We've been buried in disappointment: "You just don't act like your older brother!" "You don't get as good of grades as your sister." "The crops haven't been as good this year as previous!" Or perhaps the job that you want doesn't come around.

We've been buried in responsibilities: "Read this book and write a paper on it by tomorrow." "Memorize the Periodic Table of Elements by tomorrow." The kids have basketball practice, band practice, hockey, homework, dance, the jobs to get to, and I guess they should be involved in church just a little bit if there is time.

The past – we've been buried there too. All the times we've failed to help someone in need, the months and years our priorities have not been in the right order. Our tempers we've lost, the words we've said that we shouldn't. The hour we lost our purity, and oh so much more. Buried...by our past.

And on top of all of that – we are buried by our self. You know buried by our self-will, thinking we can be self-sufficient and self-serving, thinking that we can satisfy the self.

Buried, boxed in, six feet under, again, right here, just now—it's dark, tight, claustrophobic, and the enemy has nailed the lid shut. And if there isn't screaming, there are definitely heavy sighs and lifeless looks and empty hearts.

You know the feeling all too well. I know the feeling all too well. The feeling of being buried and boxed in with no place to go and so did the Israelites...

In the year 587 BC Babylon unleashed uricide on Jerusalem...the destruction of the architecture of the city...and even ecocide – the wiping out of the environment. Jerusalem and her people were destroyed...taken into a foreign country. There was no comfort for this people. The Israelites had no hope for a future. It's time to forget the Lord God. Jerusalem and her people chose to run after other deities...In Isaiah 1 – the city is likened to that of a harlot. So really how can there be comfort to a people that have wandered so far. They are buried and boxed in...they have no place to go.

How many of you know that the word “bedlam” comes from the word “Bethlehem”? The hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem was established in 1247 in London, but the local inhabitants of that time had their own speech, which was not always the King’s English. Bethlehem for them came out “bedlam.” When, under Henry VIII the monasteries were dissolved in the land, the hospital was given to the city of London, which incorporated it in 1547 as an insane asylum. The name bedlam became irretrievably linked with the noise and confusion within its walls. Leave it up to us – take Bethlehem and create Bedlam; to take Christmas and made it so full of noise and confusion and chaos. We know more about Bedlam than we do of Bethlehem.

Babylon wanted to keep Israel in their hopelessness which included silence. Babylon wanted to nullify and cancel all the optimistic words. Babylon wanted to create confusion and chaos for Israel...but yet...

It was once high noon at the OK Corral and our Savior put down his gone and said, “Take your best shot and shoot me.” The enemy that was causing the confusion and chaos marshaled every weapon of mass destruction. The list could go on for a while...but you know...Herod, Pilate and a traitor in Judas...thorns, nails, a spear, darkness, sweat, blood, cries until the enemy had what it wanted SILENCE.

It all ended just as we confess it, “Was crucified, died and was buried.” The tomb is sealed with a stone. Jesus Christ is buried...and not buried alive. Smell the mildew, the odor of blood, the stench of death. See the confines, the darkness, and the sealed stone. Witness the charred marks of divine explosion to life!!

And even though we are cramped by chaos, suffocating in the silence, trapped in our own transgressions and screaming in the stillness...let’s light a match and see who we are buried with.

St. Paul writes in Romans 6: “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Again Colossians 2:12: “Having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Through water and the Word, you have I have been buried...and yet are alive because we are raised with Jesus Christ our Lord. Our certain defeat is turned into that amazing fourth quarter come from behind victory.

And this is why God writes, “Comfort, comfort Ye my People.” For I can tell you here tonight, “Comfort is here, comfort is yours...Comfort is NOW!”

*Now may peace of God that passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, our Advent King. Amen.*