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First Christian Church
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Second Sunday in Advent
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“Light and Life”: Light to Walk By

(Isaiah 40:1-11) "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and say to her that her warfare has ended, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand mightily for all her sins. 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 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. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 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. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. 9 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!" 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 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.

Like a lot of novels or movies which start with the future but then go to a flashback, our scripture for today is also a kind of flashback. Last week, our scripture was from the last part of the book of Isaiah, it took place twenty years after the Hebrew people had returned to Israel from their exile in Babylon. But this morning's reading, the opening verses of Chapter 40, are a flashback, as it were, to the prophet's announcement, just **before** the exile in Babylon ended, that indeed the Hebrew people's years in Babylon were about to end. Most mainstream scholars actually think that originally the material that is now in the book of Isaiah was actually three different books – the first 39 chapters being written before the Babylonian exile happened, the middle section of the book – Chapters 40 through 55 – written to depict events just before that exile ended, and the last chapters of the book written, as I said, twenty years after the end of the exile and the return to Jerusalem..

Flashbacks are a good literary tool. Like taking your bearings when you are lost,

sometimes it helps to go back to where you started and re-orient yourself. In every wedding sermon that I do, I remind the couple that one of the reasons that they are having a wedding in this place before God and their friends is to be able to have that moment etched in their memories as a sign of the best that they want to be together, of their commitment to one another that is strong and sure – because there will those days months and years later when that marriage – any marriage! – hits its rocky spots and it is good to be able to have that flashback to remind them of who they have committed themselves to be together, to remind them of the love that bound them and yet binds them still. It's the same sort of thing that is happening here when we look at the relationship between last week's reading and this week's: by their very juxtaposition we are being invited today to go back to the hopeful way that journey out of exile began, to see what lessons that flashback holds for us when the light seems, as it did in last week's scripture, so very dim sometimes. For by returning to when things *were* clearer, we can get a sense of how to walk forward, as we seek, as our theme today has it, "light to walk by," and as we join the rest of the worldwide church in focusing on this being the Sunday in Advent when we are reminded to pray for and work for and welcome peace.

There is so very much that we could talk about in these first eleven verses of the 40th Chapter, these verses that begin this portion of what has been collated into one Biblical book. The church has long-labeled these chapters in Isaiah as "the book of comfort," for the prophet who wrote this section of the book indeed speaks in tones of comfort, in words of consolation; he speaks gently. He uses both male and female imagery and metaphors to talk about what God is like: a loving father who will lead us and a loving mother who will gather us to her breast. And his announcement, on behalf of God, is sometimes the thing that you and I most need to hear, to believe, and to act

on; did you hear it? *“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and say to her that her warfare has ended, that her penalty is paid....”* It’s over. It’s done. Other translations put it differently, but the point is the same. The New Living Translation puts it this way: *“Tell her that her sad days are gone and that her sins are pardoned.”* The Petersen translation says *“Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make it very clear that she has served her sentence, that her sin is taken care of - forgiven!”* But whatever translation of these powerfully gentle words is used, the point is this: it’s over, it’s done, and you can change – you don’t have to be who you were anymore. You are no longer prisoners, you are no longer those whose lives are determined by someone else’s whims, you are no longer jailed and trapped by what was. It’s over; it’s done; it’s finished.

And yet: Even in the face of such an announcement, you know what the temptation is, don’t you? – to nonetheless keep doing the very same things in the very same way even though the reason for doing those things is long since gone. Have you ever heard the story of the man whose wife sent him to the grocery to buy a ham? After he bought it, she asked him why he didn’t have the butcher cut off the end of the ham. He asked her why. She replied that her mother had always done it that way. Since his wife’s mother was visiting, they asked her why she always cut off the end of the ham. She replied that this was the way her mother did it; Mother, daughter and son-in-law then decided to call grandmother and solve this three-generation mystery. Grandmother promptly replied that she cut the end of the ham because her roasting pan was too small to cook it in one piece.¹ Do you know why the custom of shaking hands developed? In medieval times it was to show that your hand was not, in fact, holding a sword. We continue to say “Bless You” to folks when they sneeze, even though we no longer believe that a sneeze signifies that a portion of the soul is leaving

¹Many versions of this story can be found at www.snopes.com/weddings/newlywed/secret.asp

the body and we need to send it on its way.² How many of you type, on a computer or maybe even on a typewriter still? Have you ever wondered about the odd arrangement of the keys on a typewriter, an arrangement that medical researchers tell us is a strong contributing factor to carpal tunnel syndrome because our hands and fingers are so often misshapenly reaching for a common letter that's in an awkward spot on the keyboard? Well, it's because when the typewriter was invented, the original technology could only handle typing at about 20 words a minute; more than that and the keys jammed. So the inventor decided what was needed was not better technology, but a worse layout – by re-arranging the keys he could force typists to slow down because so many combinations of letters would require an awkward reach of the fingers.³ Now, of course, mechanical typewriters – in fact typewriters at all! – are virtually museum pieces these days, yet we still use that odd, impractical, pain-inducing layout on virtually every keyboard sold with every computer! The way things were is no longer the way things are, and yet still, often we persist in doing things as if those reasons were still valid.

Now, of course, sometimes there are some traditions where the reasons for those traditions no longer exist, but we decide, nonetheless, to keep doing those them – even though they don't really make the same sense they once did – just because they're fun. In this season, for example, we deck our houses and our church with evergreens because it's pretty and it's festive, not because we believe, as did our ancient European forebears, that such greenery was a way to ensure that the gods of nature would bring back springtime. You know the Christmas song, "Here We Come A'Wassailing"? You probably assume that it's about drinking plenty of eggnog. But the "wassail" was actually a toast that was drunk at Christmas to one's oxen and cows in the hopes that would help them give birth the following summer. We put Christmas

²<http://punctualityrules.com/2008/07/13/linguist-vs-grammarians-tradition/>

³<http://www.yourkingdomcome.com/qwerty.htm>

lights up on our houses not because, as was originally the case, it helps to scare away the devil from coming in our house, but because it's fun and it's pretty.⁴ And so, sometimes we do what we do at certain times and seasons of life because it's enjoyable, or fun, or pretty even if the original reason for those things has long since vanished.

But sometimes we do things long after the reason for doing them has vanished – and yet continuing to do so hurts our lives. Did any of you see the movie from a couple of years ago called “The Martian Child”?⁵ In it, John Cusak plays a young widower named David who decides to adopt a troubled boy. The boy, named Dennis, had been abandoned by his mother and father and Dennis proceeded to bounce from foster home to foster home, getting increasingly more troubled, increasingly, well, weird. He claimed that he was from Mars, and that the Martians had sent him to earth to do a research project. He wore weights on his legs so the difference in Earth's and Martian gravity wouldn't spin him off the planet. He dressed like a bag lady. His hair looked like an unshorn sheep. You can imagine how his schoolmates treated him; you can imagine how much more isolated all that made him. And it got worse; as part of the pre-adoption proceedings, David takes in Dennis for a trial run, as it were. And Dennis proceeds to try his very best to make David mad enough to send him away again, like the others in his past who rejected him. He steals David's stuff and hides it; he goes to a backyard barbecue with Dennis and proceeds to try to gross everyone out by doing things like pouring chocolate syrup on his hotdogs.. In the middle of the movie, he accidentally breaks a vase in David's study. David gets angry with him and the little boy screams “I knew it. You're going to send me away, aren't you?!” And that's when

⁴Many more can be found here: www.snopes.com/holidays/christmas/superstitions.asp

⁵<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0415965/>

David replies, "Dennis, there's nothing you could do that could ever make you change the way I feel." But Dennis can't quite believe it, and at the end of the movie, he packs a suitcase and runs away, makes his way to the ledge of a tall building where he is perched over the street 10 stories below waiting for the "Martians" to come in their spaceship and take him "home." David, frantic, finds him, and in the climactic scene of the movie, David, at first playing along with him, says to Dennis, "I wish we could have had more time together. I wanted to prove to you that not all parents disappear forever." Dennis, sobbing, then says to David: "Why do you think they left me?" And David says, "Because they were stupid! ... How could they not see how extraordinary you are, how big your heart is? ... Dennis, you're my son, my own, forever, and I will never, ever, ever, ever, ever leave you." At that, Dennis rushes to his arms. The final scenes of the movie show Dennis getting his goofy Martian-style hair cut, eating normal food again, dressing normally instead of like a "Martian."

And while I am sure Dennis would continue to have some hard times, as all children do, what he discovered was that he no longer **needed** to act so bizarrely; he no longer **needed** to push people away under the assumption that if he did so first then he wouldn't give them the chance to reject him, he no longer **needed** to act as if the folks who loved him would go away and abandon him. Or, as the prophet Isaiah might have said it, *"Tell him that his warfare has ended, his penalty is paid. Comfort, comfort my people, says you God."* You don't have to live this way any more. The reason you did is now gone, finished, done. The tradition you had of pushing away others before they pushed you away isn't needed anymore, because you are loved, and will never be abandoned again.

What about you? Is there some tradition, some way of being, some trait of yours that may have made sense at one time in your life but no longer does? At the holiday season, I know more than a few folks who find themselves reverting to a long-ago role

of family peacemaker and it wears them out and makes them resentful. But maybe the reason for being that peacemaker, the reason for taking that role, is no longer the same as when it started, and maybe, just maybe, you can resign from it? *“Tell her that her warfare is over, her penalty paid.”* It’s over, finished, done. And while you may not be a “Martian,” maybe you have a little bit of David in you, maybe you were hurt at some point in your life in such a way that you decided – whether you could even name it this way or not – that from now on you’d do unto others before they could do it to you. Well, Isaiah says to you: *“Tell him that his warfare is over, his penalty paid.”* It’s over, it’s finished, it’s done. Maybe for some of you Christmas feels like a test and instead of a rising sense of anticipation you find a rising sense of anxiety. I don’t know, maybe there was once a reason for that; maybe someone made fun of a present you gave or something you tried to do and it hurt. But, be honest: is that still the case? *“Tell her that her warfare is over, her penalty paid.”* It’s over, it’s finished. It’s done.

My friends, this Advent morning, God comes to you and to me to tell us that one of the ways to peace is to know when, indeed, our warfare is over and the penalty we’ve been living with whether imposed on us by ourselves or inflicted on us by others is paid. It can be over, finished, done. It’s not easy to know that, to accept it and to change your behavior because of that good news. Lord knows, it’s not easy. But God is offering to help. The way towards change, towards truly believing and acting as if you don’t have to be this way, do that thing, feel such and such a way, will not be easy. But did you hear it? God says that if you will but believe and trust, God will help make a way. God will straighten out the crooks in the road and show you the way forward. God will smooth out the hills and the valleys that are in your path as you walk hand in hand with God toward new life and new hope, walking with the One , who like David with Dennis, will never, ever, ever, ever, ever leave you.

Comfort my people, says your God. Say to her that her warfare has ended, that her penalty is paid. It's over, it's finished, it's done. Amen. Amen.