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“Discomfort and Joy”

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

So, there’s a photo that’s been going around the internet:



And somehow, it’s a perfect description of the odd place we find ourselves during this Advent season: we wait breathlessly, expectantly for a baby – a savior who has already come – while we look around us and see a world crying out in pain because the reality of the cross is still all too true today. Spoiler alert: we are still waiting these two thousand years later in a world of violence and war for a savior who has not – quite – come.

As New York and Philadelphia and other cities across the country prepared this week for the festivities of their annual tree lighting ceremonies, *another* grand jury declined to indict *another* police officer for killing *another* unarmed Black man. This time was in Staten Island, and his name was Eric Garner, choked to death while pinned to the sidewalk, repeating over and over, “I can’t breathe.” And for people who know in their bones the fear and constant danger of being Black in public, this is one in a long line of state-sanctioned deaths that stretches back centuries and which already has not been the last.

And people are angry. People are mourning. People who had already begun to organize around the verdict in Mike Brown’s case in Ferguson, MO, were ready to spring into action, and have continued marching, in almost entirely peaceful protests disrupting traffic, college classes and administrative work, and city events; staging “die-ins” in public places, raising up the memories of those left to die in the streets.

And yet, while many of us are crying out in pain, many others of us have moved on with our lives, because there are trees to decorate and presents to buy, and quite frankly perhaps we are tired of all this death. What a luxury it is to be tired of hearing about other people dying, and to simply be able to move on. But for those whose loved ones are dying, for those whose bodies are themselves at risk, for all who believe that Black lives do matter; we are in crisis, and we are at war.

A pastor friend of mine said yesterday, “Any gathering for worship tomorrow that does not address the unjust and unprosecuted killing of Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Akai Gurley and the countless other unarmed black people slain in the streets is not a church following Jesus Christ,” adding the pointed hashtag #silencekills.

The planned Christmas tree lightings have gone on, in Rockefeller Center, in Rittenhouse Square, on Boston Common, along the main walk of Columbia University; festive as usual but this year with the jarring addition of protesters by the thousands, lying down in the sidewalks and the streets with signs saying “Black Lives Matter,” “We Can’t Breathe,” “No Justice, No Peace,” and “I Could Be Next.”

Columbia made one other last-minute addition to their tree-lighting ceremony: the Black Students’ Organization was invited to perform the song “Strange Fruit,” an anti-lynching protest song that includes the words, “Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

Not surprisingly, it was a controversial decision for some people, who felt that the somber tone was inappropriate for a celebratory event. But of course, protesters focused on tree-lighting events across the country for just that reason – saying in effect, how can you celebrate while people are dying in your midst?

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And there is the paradox of Advent. How *can* we celebrate while people are dying? It’s true this year just as it has been true since the first Advent and true ever since the people of Judea began crying out for a messiah to save them from never-ending war.

We hear the words of Isaiah today as we hear them in so many Christmas seasons, and we hear them sung in Handel’s Messiah, and so they’ve become for us Christmas words, happy words! Easy words. And yet, we forget that these were first spoken to people in great pain. To people who had lost their homes and their temple and their land – and who maybe felt like they had lost their God as well. Surely God was angry with them if they were suffering like that.

But Isaiah comes with a new hope, a joyful hope for a people in pain. *God is coming! God is coming!* Even the earth itself will change; the mountains will bow and the valleys raise up, and even the roughest patches will be smooth. Take comfort! The Lord is coming, and God will cradle you like lambs, while God’s mighty arm drives away the conquering armies.

This is not a soft or easy hope – this comfort will turn the unjust and violent world on its head, while the earth itself shakes and rumbles to make itself smooth in expectation. It is a hope for people in desperate need of hope; comfort for those who have no comfort.

And then, as Mark begins writing his gospel, centuries later around the time of the Roman-Jewish war, he puts these words in the mouth of John the Baptist, again proclaiming hope in the face of despair. The Lord is coming, he says! You may have seen your temple destroyed again and lost everything you had and watched your family and friends die around you, but I tell you there is something better on the way! Our God is coming! One like we have never known before, one who gives us hope when there is no hope!

And *get ready*, he says! Prepare the way! We are not just waiting, we are charged with getting ready ourselves, and making our world ready. Isaiah's words are not just comfort for us, although surely we are all in need of God's comfort in one way or another. Isaiah's words are instructions, and Isaiah's words are a challenge: "You, comfort my people!" You, speak peace to a world at war! You, lift up your voice with strength, and tell the people that God is coming!

It is an awesome task, and sometimes feels like an impossible one. How can it be that we can look at the cross, the lynching tree, the sidewalks where our people are dying, and yet wrap them in sparkly lights to proclaim the coming of a new world? How can we, who are mostly comfortable already, speak comfort to our cities at war? How can we truly see the pain and agony of our friends and neighbors, cry out in despair with them, and yet witness to our savior coming into this world?

It is an impossible paradox, and it is our world, beloved yet broken. Let us take up the challenge, my friends.

With the Franciscans, let us cry out:

May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbors.
Amen