

“What Shall I Cry?” / Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8 / 7 December 2014

“Cry out?” Isn't that what the voice said, “Cry out”? And I said, “What should I cry?” Yeah, I could cry out. I've spent the last forty-four years not crying out; maybe it's time I did. I mean, I'm not exactly a demonstrative person—I do get weepy at baptisms—but for the most part, I don't really know *how* to cry out. Do you just tilt your head back like a Muppet and let your voice fly, arms flailing like Kermit? Do you display all your fillings to every passerby? Oh, I'd do it; I'd cry out. There are people crying out all over the country, the world! They're blocking traffic up in Oakland, they're so mad, and truly, they have a right to be. It's just that my family have always held their sorrows and frustrations in, you know, stiff upper lip, the old poker face on the outside while all their fears, and failures, and doubts, and anger rotted inside them like a cancer, sometimes resulting in real illness—ulcers and heart disease. It's the northern European way. But cry out? Sure, I could try that. I mean, sometimes I get so mad, so perplexed, so anxious about the way of the world that I could just wail like a jackal under a full moon. We could bellow, you and me, ululate, shriek, lament, make moan! You want us to cry out, Isaiah the Prophet? If you show me how to do it, I'll join you. I'll cry out for the sorrows of the world. I think it's my turn somehow. I'll cry that all flesh is grass; people are as inconstant as a flower. Our goodness withers and fades; democracy itself crumbles, and the wind blows our ashes away. Isn't it time we cried out, you and I? Yeah, I'll cry out. Won't you?

And yet, above the din and anger, above this old world's cries of desperation and rage, out on the margins, can you hear a nobler cry? “Comfort, O comfort my people.”

Now, let me tell you that I was disappointed with the way the trial of Officer Darren Wilson played out. You don't have to agree with me; that's not what this sermon is about. I know that police officers have dangerous, difficult jobs, and most of them carry out their duties with fairness and good judgment. I understand, too, that Officer Wilson is filled with real remorse that will follow him for the rest of his life. And yet, deep in my heart of hearts, I did not believe that justice had been served when he was cleared of all charges. That's my opinion; that's not the Gospel Word that this pulpit is meant for. (We're getting to that part.) I was disappointed, not heartbroken. But I have a friend who was truly heartbroken. And not just that, she was angry! She was wild with grief and rage. To her, the grand jury's decision was just one more bit of evidence that racism is on the upswing again in America and that minorities are still just second class citizens, even more so than in the 80s and 90s. Now, this friend is a kind person. We went to seminary together, and she's sweet-tempered, and funny, and bright. It hurt to see her so unhappy. She's also about as marginalized as any person I know. She's black; she's a woman; she's a lesbian and a pastor, and in addition to all of that, she's larger than the girls in the Macy's ads. Our society makes life hard for you if you are any one of those things—perhaps with the exception of being a pastor. The African-American church rejected her, and the white church mostly just doesn't “get” her, and so she started her own church on the North Side of the city. She's compassionate and a good soul, and that's why it was so hard to see her so enraged.

But she's a fighter, too. This friend helped to organize a rally on November 25 to protest the grand jury's decision. And she put out an urgent plea to all her clergy friends—of which she has fewer than you might expect. “Where is the religious presence?” she lamented. “Why aren't the churches speaking out?” She invited us to the rally. My heart told me to say yes. I could do no other. Before and after everything else, I am a pastor. I have sometimes been other things as well. But I will always be a pastor, and my calling is to stand with those who suffer, to walk beside those whose journey is anguish and grief. I went to the protest mainly to stand beside an old friend who was hurting. I ended up appearing on all three Pittsburgh news stations, only briefly, a “cameo appearance” and a debut all in one. One news photographer did an artsy sort of closeup of my profile with that of the African-American woman beside me, unbeknownst to both of us. It was a nice shot. Touching. I didn't agree with everything that some of the presenters were shouting. I had to fall silent during one of the chants, which was filled with profanities. When my friend took the microphone, in her clerical collar and her bulky black suit, she howled with fury. Oddly enough, she didn't make the evening news, perhaps

because her anger was just so hard to look at. But I'll tell you a secret, and perhaps you already know it: Anger is a secondary emotion. Wherever you see anger, it's sitting on top of a pile of deeper emotions that you do not see. Wherever you see anger, there's a whole lot of hurt, and sadness, and fear—fear!—lurking just below the surface.

No, I don't really know how to cry out, myself. It's not my way. But I'll admit to you that I could almost have done just a little bit of the other kind of crying in the car on the way home. (The kind with salty discharge that's even more forbidden to my tribe than angry howling!) I had gone to a protest to stand with one hurting soul, but I found myself in a crowd of 200 hurting souls, frightened, sad, and feeling dispossessed. I saw that we have a race problem in this country. We all thought it had gone away, but it hasn't. Recent events have made it even worse. If I knew how to go about it, I would cry out, and you would, too. There are times when we all of us feel like crying out for the suffering of our world, the injustices, the sorrows. Well we might say with the Prophet Isaiah, "You tell me how to cry out, and I will."

And the answer echoes gently from the pages of the sacred text, whispering its ancient wisdom across the ages: No, not that, my foolish child. Comfort, O comfort my rash, shortsighted child. It's easy to cry out that the news is bad. Anyone can see that all flesh is grass. They don't need *you* to tell them that. They need you to announce good news despite all this world's ills. In the midst of all life's great sorrow and pain, can you cry out good tidings? Can you cry out that God will gently lead the mother sheep and carry the weak in God's bosom? Can you be the faithful voice of one crying out in the wilderness of human despair a word of hope, a word of love, above the fray? It's easy to get mad like everyone else, and it's sometimes necessary, but the holy task of the Christian life is to speak gospel (good news) into suffering. Comfort, comfort you my people. Even in the midst of violence, and anger, and racial injustice, and environmental collapse, herald of good tidings, declare, "Here is your God."

Have you ever noticed the way John the Baptist always crashes the Christmas party? Each year on the second Sunday of Advent, grim old John of the Desert shows up with little bits of locust in his teeth and honey stuck in his matted beard, clad in musty camel pelts, wild-eyed, and unwashed, and looking very un-Christmassy. Strangely, John is the only character in the New Testament whose wardrobe and diet are described to us. And yet, he's the least glamorous character in the whole Christmas drama, not as pretty as the angels, nor as majestic as the wise men. He's not humble and awestruck like the shepherds. But year after year, ugly old John the Baptist ambles into the Christmas party, takes his place beneath the mistletoe and waits there for his kiss. Now, I like Christmas as much as the next guy. I like it so much that I still toy with the idea of sending out a Christmas letter every year. I like its pageantry, and nostalgia, and glory. But I really like John the Baptist. My favorite Christmas story is in Mark, just a voice crying in the wilderness. Think of it! It had been many a long year since the last prophet fell silent. That gap in your Bible between the Old and New testaments represents six-hundred years of silence. But then, after quiet centuries, hark! Out on the margins of the world, a voice crying in the wilderness. It's John the Baptist, crying out Isaiah's song of old, and to me it's the best Christmas story ever. "Comfort, O comfort my people. It looks like God is absent; it looks like all is lost. All flesh is certainly grass, but comfort my people! God is present among us. God is not far, but near." It's easy to join in this old world's song of doom and despair because those are real, and we all see them. It's true that our job is to cry out against injustice. But the harder task, the holier task, is to bear good tidings of great joy to a world blinded by its own sadness and rage. Comfort, O comfort...

Of course, that begs Isaiah's question: What good news? "What shall I cry?" You give me some good news, and I'll cry it...but what? We all know that the word gospel means "good news." It was right here in the first verse of Mark that the word "gospel" was coined. Mark was purposely using language and imagery that his audience would recognize from Isaiah 40. He wants to sound an echo in people's sacred memory, and it works. He cloaks the Jesus-story in language that his Jewish readers

knew and loved. But what is this good news that both Isaiah and Mark foretell...the good news that you and I should cry out above the clamor and din of our death-dealing world? What is the gospel that we've been hearing about all our lives? I've heard things called gospel that are decidedly bad news, really, because they make God out to be a cosmic bully. I've heard things called gospel that depict God as an omnipotent child abuser. What's the good news? What is it? I'm ready to cry out, but what shall I cry?

Ah, and that's the beauty and the wisdom of the sacred text! It tells us to cry out good news, but it never tells us exactly what that good news is! In Isaiah, it's the fact that God is not a wrathful judge but a loving shepherd. In Mark, the good news is the story itself: Jesus' living for all that is right; his denying the powerful systems of injustice and greed; his laying down his life for all that is good and right; his rising again to a new kind of life. The story itself is the gospel, for it models a joyful alternative way of life. Deep, abiding joy comes to those who do not seek it, but who seek instead the well-being of the stranger. This is salvation, at least in Mark, the good news that all the shepherds, and the angels, and the wise men of the other gospels point toward. Good tidings, gospel!

And so...what shall I cry? What will you cry? I know sometimes you want to. It's easy to make moan over all that's bad, and I'm not ridiculing those who do so with reason. But let's ask the question a different way: How can you speak good news into the wilderness of human brokenness today? This world needs a few more voices crying in the wilderness, messages of hope and love. Cry love. Cry hope. Cry peace and joy. Cry that the human family are not enemies of God, standing condemned, but we are estranged—from each other and from God our Source. Cry reconciliation. What we most deeply need is reconciliation, with God and with each other. Do not add to the cacophony of a frightened world, breathing threats, and insults, and curses. No, above the din and anger, above this old world's cries of rage and desperation, cry out a grace-filled word. What shall I cry? What will you cry? Comfort, O comfort my people. Amen.