

Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye My People (The Three Wise Men)

Isaiah. 40:1-5, 10-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

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.

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December 17, 2023

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I.

In years past, during our annual Service of Lessons and Carols, I have traditionally offered a mere “meditation” on Advent and Christmas, allowing ample room and opportunity for the scriptural narrative of Christ’s birth, reinforced by fondly held Advent hymns, to carry the day. This year, however, owing to circumstances soon to be related, I would like to offer a sermon proper subtitled, “The Three Wise Men”; with these sagacious fellows being Fred, Ben, and Wayne.

Fred is an old friend of mine and a clerical consort. I have known Fred for over 30 years; first as a classmate at Princeton Theological Seminary, then as a colleague during his time as the Pastor at First Watertown and, in these later years, as an ecclesiastical touch-stone and shoulder on which to rely (or, when required, on which to cry).

II.

I also serve as one of Fred’s references: first when he moved on from Northern NY and, more recently, as he now seeks to discern the possibility of a new call to ministry. Herein lies the tale.

The week before last I had a long conversation with a member of the search committee for a rather large, urban Presbytery seeking an “EP,” or Executive Presbyter, for which Fred is a candidate (remember, *Presbyter* is Greek for elder). In our system of church government, an EP is somewhat analogous to a bishop. It is a *big* job (often thankless) with *expansive* responsibilities (and commensurately high pay) to which many may aspire as a professional pinnacle (though for which few are qualified).

Fred is *absolutely* qualified. He has been head of staff at several large churches. He is smart as a whip, can read a Profit/Loss statement like nobody’s business, and has both the talent and enthusiasm for administrative leadership as a means to serve the Gospel.

III.

More uniquely for a person considering such a role, Fred has the heart of a pastor. Which, unfortunately, is quite rare for an EP; at least in my experience. While all of this may turn out to be less a blessing and more a curse, I was nevertheless emphatically positive in endorsing Fred to the member of the search committee with whom I spoke. I told them, frankly, Fred would be terrific in the position, that they would be crazy *not* to hire him and, more to the point, he is *exactly* the kind of person our denomination needs in these roles; *desperately* so.

Shortly after I had this conversation, Fred was invited to a *third* interview and, it would seem, an offer and call might be imminently forthcoming. If not, this Presbytery will almost certainly have “missed the boat” because Fred is the real deal. Not offering him the job would be a deeply egregious error on their part; though, perhaps, not so much for Fred.

IV.

Ben is the second of our wise men. An older gentleman, widower, career military, and senior member of the search committee seeking a new pastor at their church for which Fred is *also* a candidate under great consideration. It seems that when he began his search, Fred cast a wide net to include both EP and traditional pastor positions. Timing, fate and the hand of God have now placed him at a possibly interesting, if not perplexing crossroads.

Frankly, the EP role would be a *major* pain in the...neck, and a thankless job. That said, it would come with an endless array of shiny objects to capture Fred’s attention. More than anything, Fred likes a challenge; and, in the role of EP he would have a great many thrust upon him. In contrast, remaining in parish ministry as pastor to this *particular* new church, while almost certainly a much smaller canvas on which to paint, would be a challenge of a very different sort: one of his own making. Which, to me, is the greater the two.

V.

How do I know this, and with such apparent assuredness? Well, because Ben told me as much, though not necessarily in so many words when I had the opportunity, privilege really, to speak with him a few days ago. In preparation for this conversation, I had read and reviewed his church’s “MIF”

(Ministry Information Form) which gives a rough sketch of who the congregation believes itself to be, what they want and need to do, and the kind of person they are seeking to be their new Pastor. Having been in such a role for three decades, I know a good and healthy church when I see one; something for which I have all of you to thank.

Objectively, then, my conversation with Ben began with me knowing his church was hitting all the right marks. However, it was the subjective information which Ben provided that really sealed the deal. As Ben and I spoke, it became immediately apparent to me that he, too, is the real deal: earnest, decent, forthright, educated and informed, humble, compassionate, overflowing with goodness and, yes, wise.

VI.

Which is everything for which one could hope in a parishioner and, correspondently, in a new parish. At the end of the day, pastoral ministry (and I would argue, the church in general) is all about people and their relationships; their relationships with each other, their relationship to God and, most germane to this particular tale, the relationship between congregation and pastor.

As you would expect, and with Fred's permission, I was utterly transparent with Ben. I told him of the EP position for which Fred is being simultaneously considered, and the dilemma between the two which I perceived to be possibly unfolding. I also told Ben, in no uncertain terms, that I was pulling for his congregation. When I discovered Fred and the search committee from his church had not yet met in person, I advocated for them doing so, telling him I would make a strong suggestion to Fred that, if the way be clear, he make a trip down to meet with them. Which I did when I spoke to Fred later that day.

VII.

The third wise man in today's tale is our very own Wayne Miller; widower to Dolly, a dear lady and much beloved former member of our congregation. A retired dairyman, Wayne still lives in the same house in which he was born on the family farm on the Eddy-Pyrites Road. Wayne is as honest as the day is long, as honorable as they come, and still sharp as a tack. Which is saying something, as Wayne is 103 years old; the very definition of an "old timer."

Late this past Thursday afternoon, I stopped by unannounced to drop off a Christmas Goody Bag to him, allowing plenty of time for a nice long chat. Wayne is what I like to call “an easy visit.” He is an engaging, authentic, and funny person, and as real a deal as you will find. You always learn something new about Canton, his life growing up here, and the world that once was but is, now, no longer. You also walk away with a sense of privilege in having been imparted this information, and feeling as if you got *far* more than you gave.

VIII.

Wayne and I visited for about an hour. We talked about the old, beautifully weathered cedar shake sided outbuilding by the garage, the “hit and miss engine” he regrets selling in 1943 after electricity came to the farm, the phone line that came in around 1947 and how you could hardly ever use it because every family in the neighborhood would (and could) be on it at the same time, how some Amish use the orange triangles on their buggies while others do not, his 1998 pickup truck with 31k miles on it which still has the original tires, his fancy new TV (he likes old Westerns), changes in hay balers he’s seen over the years, so many kind words for his neighbors and, then, we made plans for us to take a ride around his 140 acres this spring in his “Gator.” Which is a date I *surely* hope we can keep.

At a point I asked him how he was doing. He said, “Oh, I can’t complain. I have everything I need. Meals on wheels get delivered, a person comes to help me get dressed and bathed and keep the house clean. But that’s different than having someone here with you; I just get lonely.”

IX.

Well, as you might imagine, this was like a dagger to my heart, but it was not the first such dagger my heart received that day. Earlier in the morning, at 5:30 a.m., I had a brief email exchange with Wanda Renick; who, at the end of it, wrote, “Thank you for loving, it is lonely being 95.”

As I heard or read these words, they were neither plaintive or doleful but, rather, simply statements about the reality of the situation. At age 103 and 95 years of age, respectively, I must imagine loneliness goes with the territory. This certainly is not news to me, but I have to tell you, Wayne and Wanda really struck a chord in me; but, not the one you might expect.

X.

Today's scripture reading, from Isaiah ch. 40, is one commonly heard at Christmas. It speaks to a time in Jewish history which had seen the temple destroyed and the people forcefully exiled to Babylon and held there in captivity for 70 years. After three generations of living as strangers in a strange land, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah offering a message of comfort and hope about a return to their homeland and their restoration as a nation. Now, at Christmas, we celebrate the arrival of the Son of God, born in a manger, the Messiah; and we look forward, expectantly, to the day when such a Messiah would return to us and restore not just a nation, but our world and the entire creation.

While we may understand these events in a number of ways from joyous and triumphant to redemptive and salvific, the one I would lift up to you is far more humble: comfort ye, comfort ye, my people; you will not be lonely anymore. We will be gathered up in God's arms, and carried home in God's bosom, through valleys which have been lifted up and over mountains made low, and the Glory of the Lord will be made known to us, and to all.

XI.

In some way, and at some level, we are *all* lonely. That is the reality of our situation. Christmas is a time when we may feel that loneliness more acutely; either because we cannot get home for Christmas, or because such a home exists, now, only in the dreams of years gone by. Some who have lived a great many years experience the loneliness of out-living those who loved them; their family and friends. For others, there is the loneliness that comes with the belief there is no one "out there" who cares about them. For too many, there is the loneliness of feeling like strangers, unseen, unheard and not understood, in world which grows stranger all the time. We each feel an existential loneliness in being distinct, separate and a part from; or, from a perceived lack of meaning or purpose in life. Finally, when any of us look up at the night sky we see the stars and, set against the enormity of the cosmos, understand the loneliness of our planet spinning in the dark & cold of space.

XII.

With our children now gone, I, too, have been feeling a sense of loneliness these days. These past few weeks, as I have gone to farms, trailer parks and

very humble homes on your behalf, I cannot ignore or avoid the sense of loneliness nipping at the soul of far too many people here in our own county and community. So it was on Thursday, that I carried with me a burden of loneliness, the weight of my own and the weight of others, as I knocked upon Wayne's door with gift of Goody Bag in hand.

Afterward, as I climbed back into my car with 103 year old Wayne and his walker standing at the door to see me off, I realized that if only for that one hour the loneliness was gone, both for Wayne and for me. In its place was the gift of gladness in each of our hearts. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.

XIII.

I was thinking about all this last Thursday evening while I was alone at the lake, listening to the Grateful Dead turned up quite loud on the stereo and making red pepper soup ahead of the night's football game. I was going to write Fred and tell him all this; to put in my "two cents" if you will. I figured if could be a reference *for* him I should also be a point of reference *to* him,

Then, it dawned on me that all of this would work well as a sermon. So, I texted Fred to ask if I could share a bit of his story, recognizing that doing so would carry with it some degree of risk as word might get back to his current church (so *please*, mum's the word). He replied immediately, though, saying, "Preach, I'm happy to help any sermon." To which I said, "Atta boy!"

XIV.

I have no idea what the future holds for my friend Fred. Obviously, there are great many factors for him to consider. I believe, though, that whatever he decides it will be the right thing because God will make it so. I, on the other hand, have only one consideration: that I care deeply for him, and his family. Whereas either of these two options, the EP position or Ben's church, will ask for and require him to give a great deal, one thing I know for sure is that the church will give *back* to him a comfort against the loneliness we all feel. Something which is both rare and hard to come by in this world.

While certainly not the case for every church, I believe with great conviction it would be so with Ben's church. And, I know with great conviction that is the case with all of you here in *this* church; my church, your church, our church. Amen.