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Sermon 17 July 2022

Mother God

Isaiah 66:10-14

(This reading was transferred from Ord Sunday 14 to Ord Sunday 16)

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm and dangled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass, and it shall be known that the hand of the LORD is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies.

A couple of weeks ago, my daughter and I went to the movies, we had a window of time to spend together and randomly booked what was available. We ended up at the French Film festival at the Rialto - watching a delightful film called Haute Couture. The film sees a retiring Dior dressmaker take a stroppy girl from the Paris slums under her wing and teach her the tricks of the trade. As the film progresses, the back story of both the retiree and the teen are slowly revealed - the retiree spending much of her time eating her feelings, having given up on the hope of reconciling with her own daughter, the teen lost in resentment of caring for her mentally unwell mother - struggling to see a way out. Both in their own ways embodying the biblical idea of exile, a theme that backdrops the story of the people of God in the book of Isaiah – the context for today’s reading. Their surprise encounter in the underground of Paris leads to the development of an unlikely friendship where both find comfort, challenge, and in the end flourishing.

As we look closely at the reading today, we discover the invitation for God’s people to who are mourning over Jerusalem, to rejoice and be glad for her – the metaphor of children, nursing at their mother’s breast is used, and those hearing the invitation are invited to rejoice, to drink, to nurse. In doing so, the Lord says they prosper, they will see, they will flourish and they will – and this point is repeated more than once- be comforted!

The metaphor sparks imagery of motherhood, and perhaps because I am a mother myself a rush of memories, struggle, hopes and dreams.

In a deeper dive, the book of Isaiah addresses an exiled people who are desperate. The glorious past is undone, and the present alienation for the people is agony – the future – looks dubious. In chapters prior, the poet has challenged the people of God and their focus on rebuilding the temple – displeased with their worship. God's city has become a place of conflict. The people identify as challenged because of political unrest, and change, and like so much of the overarching biblical narrative, a waxing and waning of matters of the heart – loyalty, stubbornness, and no doubt exhaustion. Perhaps not too dissimilar to the cultural angst of our experience today.

And yet, these verses offer a stark contrast to the problem. In the verses prior, a woman is described as giving birth without labor – a reassuring promise that God is able to do the unexpected in bringing to birth the children of Zion – and the promise that their joy will exceed whatever grief previously existed. The metaphor is filled with assurances that the future is bigger than the past, offers hope beyond denial for both individuals and communities in exile and offers hope for the next generation.

In preparing for this sermon – Helen encouraged me to take the text for a walk. I purposefully spent some time in and around our central Auckland location. I took myself off to my favorite council facility for swimming - the tepid baths. Normally just focused on my exercise – this time, with the impending idea of a sermon deadline in mind, I embraced some intentional observation, to see what God might reveal. As I was changing after my swim, a mother was assisting her young child to transition from their swim to their soccer photo – to which – as I overheard they would be biking to on their electric bike – I have to admit I was a bit jealous – what a cool mum I thought! But what surprised me, was the conversation that I overheard before they left – “what will be for dinner tonight – said the child? “I’m not sure, replied the mother, shall we ask Mummy Tish when we get home? I was surprised, humbled and challenged. My assumptions of motherhood and family – despite in my commitment to diversity, recognizing that I still had pre-described notions of family, and feeling grateful they had been disrupted and sensing the Holy Spirit holding, nurturing me and helping me see.

You see, just like the characters in the movie I saw with my daughter, there was a backstory that was gently and truthfully revealed as I was attentive to it in relation to this mother and daughter exchange. Holding Isaiah purely in its context upon reading, the prophecies of the book speak to a particular historical and political situation, with an encouragement to the people of God to dare to imagine a God who can both disrupt and embrace.

So what if we – as we approach today's reading, held that thought. What if we didn't rush to our post resurrection knowing, or pre conceived ideas too soon. Our own prescribed ideas of this God who promises to nurture, prosper and comfort may need some dismantling and reconstruction. To speak then only of the disaster faced by the people of God, could be to miss the message of the Lord's grace in despair. Similarly to begin with comfort is to jump over the need to understand the past and distort the comfort this passage speaks off into generalized or cheap grace. Walter Brueggemann agrees that we "can't arrive too early at our own conclusions, and at the same time, we can't put it off for too long!"¹ To speak then only of disaster is to miss the message of the Lord's grace in despair. To begin with comfort though is to jump over the need to understand the past and distort the comfort into generalized ease or deep grace.

So what then is the invitation here? A final story, in which I saw this comforting, consoling, prospering God in the people around me. I love to walk about the Orakei basin. The day before I had reached out to a friend and female priest who has graduated from college and been priesting in another diocese for 5 years. You see I wanted to ask her for further insights to comments she had made on a Women's Leadership Development initiative I am part of coordinating – I felt curious, and to be honest was in despair over where the initiative is heading and frustrated at its potential to become an all hui no do-ie group. She hadn't replied. Lo and behold, as I walked about the basin lamenting this frustration, who do I bump into – but her! As we talked, I discovered she was moving through a significant grief – and she heard my frustrations about the task in front of me. She in her grief, had come back to Auckland to be with her mum – to be consoled, to be comforted.

¹ <https://www.abundantcommunity.com/peter-block-walter-brueggemann-and-john-mcknight-in-conversation>.

We shared deeply, we met again the next day to walk, and as a result we both saw that God was with us, in an unlikely friendship we came away better, we found comfort.

The metaphor guarantees intimacy. Today's gospel reading is from Luke – and centers on the story of sisters Mary and Martha. Natalie Carnes in her book *Motherhood*² – A Confession, reminds us that both Martha's work and Mary's rest as different ways of imitating God who never stops working good things and who is at the same time rest himself. But that one merits rebuke, while the other models the perfect life for centuries of monks. She suggests that Martha's imitation of divine hospitality is perverse because it leaves no room for God's actual presence her activity not Christ's presence, become the center around which the visit turns for her and her preparations take up all the space and air banishing any whiff of worship. Her feverish attempts to imitate God gave blinded her to God's presence in her home. The Martha like demands of planning and parenthood and maybe in the Isaiah metaphor or labour are overridden by the undiminished longing of a child that is ordered eventually – when the mother recognizes the call, to attachment, pleasure and intimacy and an unwavering singleness of desire. The poet in Isaiah will stop at nothing to enumerate the wondrous miracles of newness that are about to emerge amid this community without prospect.

The metaphor also advocates for victory over our enemies Perhaps then the invitation is to lean into the very thing that might be causing us frustration. The prophet's encouragement? To recognize that even though something may look fraught, or hopeless – we will see that the hand of the Lord is with us – and as we realize God too has indignation at the enemies we might experience a further invitation to be aroused, or angry at injustice and moved to action. In response to the Roe vs (insert) decision this week, a writer I follow Glennon Doyle³ stated: “comfort to every human being who feels afraid right now. I feel afraid too. It is okay to feel afraid and tender now. Soon, the anger returns and we fight like (swears) hell. First the pain, then (she swears) rising.”

While the invitation is to rejoice, there is an acknowledgement of the mourning, and of the unknown – and God's ability to transform from morning to rejoicing comes not from

² Carnes, Natalie. *Motherhood: A Confession*. Stanford University Press, USA, 2020.

³ Doyle, Glennon. *Untamed*. Ebury Publishing, London, 2020.

rushing to cheap grace or easy answers – but by being constantly and continually invited into worship with God – to have our default answers and responses disrupted by God's surprises, and all the while be held in the divine embrace!