

Free From Concern
Isaiah 40:1-11
November 26, 2017 Advent 1

My family and I traveled to Des Moines for Thanksgiving. The feast is at my sister's house, with her family and my parents. Picture it: The smoked turkey is amazing, as are the desserts, and the appetizers, and the leftovers, and the leftover desserts, and the leftover appetizers. I eat too much and when everyone else goes to sleep, my stomach is keeping me awake.

For comfort, I turn to Netflix and I start watching a documentary on comedian Jim Carrey. In the documentary, Jim Carrey describes his early career. After a show, he lies in bed at night asking himself, over and over again, "what do they want? What does the audience want?" Then one night, he woke up in the middle of sleep, sat up in bed and said, "they want to be free from concern." He decides to be the guy who acts like he is free from concern.

I think, "I'd like to be free from concern. My indigestion is a concern, but I have so many deeper concerns. We have so many concerns. What can meet us in our concern?" I decide I'm going to be awake for awhile, so I get in my van to go for a middle of the night drive.

I drove the few blocks from my sister's house to interstate 235 that cuts through Des Moines. The sign says, I-235 W. Omaha, I-235 E. Comfort, Less Concern, Home. Confused, I decide to turn onto I 235 E. As soon as I do, a woman appears on the on ramp ahead of me. She holds her hands out for me to stop. I do. I roll down the window. She is bundled up in a long winter coat. She is young. Even in the coat, I can tell she is with child. "Park your van," she says to me. "You must walk from here." "This is the interstate. I just want to go on a drive." "Park your van, you must walk from here." she repeats. I look up and see an interstate highway that is completely empty except for a few people walking east. I make a mental note to not eat so much at Thanksgiving next year. I park my van, get out and start walking onto the interstate highway.

The lanes of the interstate highway are like lanes of moving sidewalk at the airport, with each lane toward the center moving more quickly than the one next to it. I step onto the outside lane, get my balance on this moving highway, and I notice that on the lane in front of me, it says

“loneliness.” I’m in the loneliness lane. Once I get my balance, I decide to move into the lane next to me that is moving even more quickly. When I do, I see that this lane says, “heartbroken.” I’m in the heartbroken lane. I decide to move into the next lane, “the angry lane,” and then towards the fast lane because that’s the sort of guy I am, which is appropriately titled, “the overwhelmed” lane. I’m walking casually in the overwhelmed lane, but I’m racing through life.

As I walk east, I walk past the exit to Roosevelt High School, and I see the same woman with child motioning high school students onto the interstate . There’s a group of Latino students merging on, and I hear one wondering if her parents will be deported. Those students take their places in either the heartbroken, angry, or overwhelmed lanes. There’s another group of students, I can hear them talking anxiously about grades, AP classes, ACT prep, college applications. No one is listening, but everyone is talking, and they all take their places in the overwhelmed lane. There are a few students, walking alone, they are staying away from others and others are staying away from them. They step into the first lane, the lonely lane, and that’s where they stay.

I keep walking east and I pass the exit that you would take to go to Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ. A very large, vibrant UCC church in Des Moines. On the on ramp to the Interstate the same woman with child is there and she stops a school bus on the ramp. On the side of the school bus it says, “Plymouth UCC English as a Second Language Classes.” Out of the bus come people that I can tell are from all over the world, refugees from 15 different countries who are making a new home in Des Moines: Myanmar, Bhutan, Iraq, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Ukraine, Bosnia, and others. As they step onto the interstate highway, some stay in the lonely lane, while others move to heartbroken, angry, and overwhelmed.

We walk past residential neighborhoods, and the woman with child ushers parents with young children into the overwhelmed lane. All kinds of households of people are being ushered onto the interstate by the woman with child. There’s nothing remarkable about them, but I know that some are grieving, some are dealing with conflict, some are struggling to make ends

meet, some are facing all of those at the same time, and they pick their lanes and they start walking.

We start walking through the downtown. We pass a hospital, and patients, doctors, people holding medical bills in clenched fists, all are being ushered onto the highway by the woman who is with child. They choose their lanes, lonely, heartbroken, angry, overwhelmed. Next, professionals from the Principal Insurance high rise start walking onto the interstate. The woman with child is smiling at them and welcoming them onto the highway. Most of them go into the overwhelmed lane.

We start walking past the state capitol building, and at this on ramp, the woman with child is standing in the middle of two lines of people filing out of the capitol building and onto the highway. Senators, representatives, lobbyists, men in one line, women in the other. The woman with child is ushering them too. She is calling out, “men stay in the lonely lane, even if it isn’t what you feel.” The women all move quickly to the angry lane and some go to the overwhelmed lane just to get as far away from the men as possible.

We all are walking east: lonely, heartbroken, angry, overwhelmed.

“Excuse me, pardon me, make way, coming through.” It’s the pregnant woman again. She is in the fast lane, overwhelmed and is walking quickly to get in front of everyone. She passes me and then as we approach the I-235, I-80 interchange, the sign says, “I-35 North Minneapolis, I-80 east Comfort, Less Concern, Home.” At the interchange itself, the woman directing traffic. She called out, “Comfort, Less Concern, Home, that way, go east. Everyone must go east, “Comfort, Less Concern, Home.”

We all walk East. Soon, we are outside of Des Moines, harvested corn and bean fields stretch in all directions as far as the eye can see, like a desert. The interstate now is straight, flat, the lanes are moving faster and faster and faster.

In the distance is a bright light, the only light other than the stars. As we walk toward the light I can see it is one of those new electronic billboards and it is flashing words over and over again. "Isaiah 40 - Comfort my people." "In the wilderness prepare the way. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever."

Then I hear her again. "Excuse me, pardon me, make way, coming through." It is the woman with child, but this time as she passes me, I jog to catch up with her.

"Excuse me," I say. "Where are we going?"

"Didn't you see the signs?" she asks. "Comfort, Less Concern, Home."

"But my home is towards Minneapolis, another direction." I said.

"No, home is this way." she says. "The billboard explains it."

"I try not to pay much attention to billboards about the Bible."

"No, no, no," she says. "This one you must." She starts reciting: "Isaiah 40 - Comfort my people." "In the wilderness prepare the way. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever."

"What is the word of God?"

The woman looks at me. "It's love. The Word is love. We are going home. Love is our home. Love will meet our concern."

I sigh, I look at all the people behind me and say, "What can love even do with all of this concern? This is foolish."

The woman looks at me and smiles. "That's exactly the right question." What *can* love do with all of this concern? What can love do with our loneliness? What can love do with our broken hearts? What can love do with the conflict and injustice that are behind our anger? What can love do with the feeling that life is spinning out of control? What is foolish is not giving love a chance to show us what it can do."

I walk for a while, thinking about that. Then I ask, “why do we forget what love can do?”

The woman with child says, “you all seem very busy.” She continues. “We don’t even know all that love can do because love is always doing new things and showing us new possibilities.”

“I have to go.” she says. “I have to get ready,” and she rubs her belly.

“What are we supposed to do?” I ask.

“Keep walking. This highway is leading you home. Love is your home. Trust that love will meet your concern.”

I guess there is nothing to do but keep walking.

Amen.