

Comfort  
Isaiah 40: 1-11  
December 8, 2019  
Rev. Todd Smith Lippert

This week I met a farmer from Montgomery named Bob Krocak. We were at the same event, and we were introduced. "I'm Bob," he said to me. "I'm retired, but not by choice. I had to sell my dairy cows in May."

I already knew this because Bob's a bit of a local celebrity. The Washington Post has been chronicling the plight of Bob's dairy farm over the last year. I had read the articles about Bob and Liz, their son Marty and his wife Sarah and their children.

Bob's body shows the effects of a lifetime of milking. He bends forward at the waist at 10-15 degrees. As I reached out to shake his hand I knew what I was in for. His large vice-like grip engulfed my hand, his fingers were large from work and growing up milking by hand. His hands were so rough it felt like he had sandpaper gloves on. I knew he could feel from my handshake that I worked in an office in the same way that I could feel from his that he worked in a barn.

I liked Bob immediately. He's an outgoing, outspoken story teller, completely comfortable with who he is. I told him that I'd seen the articles, that I was sorry, and that I had been wanting to meet him. He told me he was doing ok. He pointed to a small ponytail in the back of his head and told me that he decided he wasn't going to cut his hair until there was a new president in the White House. He figured he could do something new at age 65. It

reminded me of my father in law telling me 20 years ago, that he wasn't going to get any more speeding tickets until Clinton was out of the White House.

Bob told me that his dairy consistently had the lowest somatic cell counts of anyone around, an indicator pointing to the health of his herd and the quality of his milk and cream. He was proud of the work he had done.

The people gathered at this event sat down and started sharing their stories and their concerns with the group. Bob spoke up.

"I had to sell my dairy cows this spring," he said. "The Krocak farm has been milking cows since 1888." At this point he started to tear up, and he stopped. A man behind me began speaking. "Bob, I want to thank you for going public with your story. People need to know this is happening. I went through the same thing fifteen years ago. I've felt what you are feeling."

Bob paused and then started talking about the Washington Post reporter and pulitzer prize winning photographer who were frequent visitors to his farm. He liked them. The photographer was coming out again soon. He wanted Bob to take him ice fishing.

Bob told us that he hadn't read a word of the articles. He simply couldn't do it. He also said that he didn't know, until the reporter and photographer showed up, that his son, who was also working tirelessly to save the farm, had been contemplating suicide. He assured us that his son is doing ok, but it hurt him that as a father he didn't know.

Bob, this lively, outgoing farmer, was carrying a tremendous amount of pain.

As I read the words from Isaiah for today, “Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God,” I thought of Bob telling part of his story while his voice cracked with emotion. I thought of a friend whose spouse had been at the doctor and received worrying test results while we were having lunch together, and together they would need to wait for more test results.

I thought of something else I said to someone this week. I said, “I hate Advent.” Eyebrows raised. I had to clarify my statement. Not the liturgical season, not what we do in church, lighting the candles week by week, singing of all that the Christ means, preparing for the birth. All of this I love.

But there are times when we live Advent in our lives. It will happen to all of us. We will be waiting to know what is next, wondering if that time will ever come. We will be waiting for the pain to fade and wondering if it will. Week two in Advent is the middle. We can’t see Bethlehem yet, but we are too far in to go back. We’re in the middle of Lake Superior in a rowboat, and we just have to keep going.

Last week we heard from Jeremiah who was speaking in the midst of Jerusalem being conquered by Babylon and living in the midst of destruction and loss. Jeremiah offered hope. Isaiah is speaking to the same moment, and he does the same.

Isaiah speaks “Comfort, O comfort my people” says your God.” Not, “comfort, O comfort you people.” You people, over there, who are distant from me. That’s not what is said. But “comfort, O comfort, *my* people”. My child, my children. There is belonging, there is

connection, God is *with* the people when Jerusalem feels abandoned, when Jerusalem has lost it all and is in tremendous pain, when Jerusalem is in the middle and can't get back to how things used to be, or see how things might possibly change.

In Isaiah 39:5-7, the prophet says to king Hezekiah, that "days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which you have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left." Scholar Walter Brueggemann says that after chapter 39, the book of Isaiah requires a long, hopeless wait - until the utterance of chapter 40.

Chapter 40 is when a hopeful word is spoken. Something besides just being in the despairing middle and not being able to go back or go forward is imagined. And this word arrives with remarkable tenderness and gentleness, with full awareness of how raw the wounds still are.

Waiting times come with second guessing, beating oneself up. But the news to Jerusalem is that you have suffered enough, more than enough. It is time to let it go, to place the burden of the past, down, and to look forward. "The journey will get easier from here," is the news. "The valleys lifted up, the mountains brought low, the rough places made smooth."

Then the core of the message comes in this honest but beautiful way. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, cry to her, not only that she has suffered enough, but that "all people are grass."

"All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

We are mortal. There is so much over which we have no control. And yet, there is a love that is beyond our mortality. There is a love that is stronger than all that causes pain. It is to this love that we belong. It is love and generosity and grace that make the world go 'round. We may not be able to see it or feel it when we are in the middle of Advent, in the middle of Lake Superior, unable to see land behind or before, but we are invited to place our trust in this love that gives birth to new things, all the time. This love is what will save us. The child who will be born is a sign of how the world is.

These words of Isaiah are so brave as they seek to speak to our deepest pain, the depths of the human condition. This is rare.

One of the news stories saying something about our culture right now is the blowup over the Pelaton commercial. Have you seen this? In case you've missed it, Pelaton is a new kind of stationary exercise bike with fun features that connect you to a community and all sorts of cool things. Pelaton released an ad over Thanksgiving that has been taking a bruising on social media. The ad begins with a husband giving his wife a Pelaton for Christmas. Is he suggesting that his wife needs to get in shape? Uh oh.... She is very excited, and nervous (about getting on an exercise bike) and she starts this year long exercise odyssey, video journaling it with her phone. The song in the background is "She's so high," by Tal Bachman. Lyrics include "She's so high, high above me/what could a guy like me ever really offer...." The answer is, a Pelaton.

This advertisement has been parodied mercilessly for being sexist. The male actor in the commercial has said he is afraid it is going to ruin his career.

I'm also interested in the last line of the commercial. The husband and wife are sitting on the couch watching her video journal of her year with Pelaton, and then she says, "A year ago, I didn't know how much this was going to change me."

That's the salvation line. This will change your life. This will change the world. Commercials regularly offer salvation and that's fine. Health and exercise change life for the better, that's all good. It is important to recognize that Religion is one voice in a salvation marketplace. There always have been many voices offering salvation and there always will be. But there is something different and deeper in what the church is promising.

The church at its best speaks to us even in our deepest pain in our individual lives and our lives together. We proclaim that deep down, love is what really saves us. We proclaim through the voices of our ancestors throughout the centuries that powerful love is here, with us, even in our pain. That powerful love can hold us in our pain, and give birth to something new, and even work on healing those parts of us that are fearful and wounded. The child we prepare for is a sign that God is with us, that love is with us. The child is good news for the depths of the human condition.

We carry our whole selves with us to Bethlehem, the whole of who we are. Listening to tender, encouraging words on the way, hopefully sustaining us until we can see and experience for ourselves that something new is here, and it is lovely, and it is good. Amen.