**A Discomforting Comfort**

**Isaiah 40: 1-11
Mark 1:1-8**

“I can’t breathe”, those were the last words uttered by Eric Garner on the streets of New York City as police officers held him down in a strangle hold for the crime of selling cigarettes on the street. Charles Blow, an Op-ed columnist for the New York Times has it exactly right when he suggests Eric Garner’s last words capture the feeling of people anywhere and everywhere who are blamed for their suffering. “I can’t breathe”. Anyone facing loss, anyone struggling with discouragement or despair over life’s circumstances, anyone who has known the pain of abuse or rejection, may find themselves, face to face with the accusation, it’s your own fault. You did it to yourself. Sometimes those accusations are self-inflicted, “what a fool, what an idiot, how could I be so stupid.” Like a police officer in New York City, those accusations put a strangle hold on us, forcing the life out of our bodies, gasping for air, “I can’t breathe.”

 In the case of Eric Garner in New York City and Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, the accusations are not only thrown at these two African American men, but as Charles Blow points out they are thrown at entire populations of people where poverty, school to prison-pipelines, underfunded education, inadequate health care, and historical oppression intersect. Blow points out that it’s your fault argument can “usually be distilled to some variation of this: Black dysfunction is mostly or even solely the result of black pathology…. Blow goes on to state, that if you scratch this argument, “what oozes out reeks of race-informed cultural decay or even genetic deficiency and predisposition, as if America is not the progenitor – the great-grandmother – of African American violence.”

 “I can’t breathe”, are words that could be uttered by anyone who feels the stranglehold of accusation and blame for the suffering, the loss, the heartache they presently face. It could be felt in a funeral home, in an unemployment line, at a hospital, at school with yet another failing grade, in a women’s shelter, on campus or the workplace, in the quiet of one’s home where loneliness is especially pronounced. Accusations of failure and blame grab hold of us, forcing the air out of our bodies. “I can’t breathe”.

 These are words that could have been easily uttered by the people of Israel who for the past 150 years have been forced to live as exiles in Babylon. At an earlier time, prophet’s like Jeremiah and the first of the Isaiah prophets, used strong language about God’s judgment to warn the people that unless they changed how they were living, unless they returned to the God of relationship and covenant, justice and mercy, they would suffer the consequences of their actions. The theology of these prophets is an interventionist theology, seeking to shake people out of their lethargy, their complacency. Like global climate change scientists today or people concerned about the excessive drinking of a friend or family member, First Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets of their day said loudly and clearly God will not protect you from yourselves.

 The problem for the people in exile, this interventionist theology, this theology of warning emanating from the heart of love, is now being misapplied, misused in a way that blames those who suffer in exile. It’s your fault. You get what you deserve. If you had done the right thing, if you had followed the rules, if you had been obedient, none of this would have happened. This upside down, blame the victim theology is a theology that works particularly well for those benefiting from the status quo or those simply unwilling to face the pain in their own lives, or the lives of others. If we can blame the people who suffer there is no need to ask more difficult questions about why such suffering exists or even look honestly at the hurt and loss in our own lives. Like Eric Garner, like all who find themselves in a choke hold, the Babylonian exiles, find themselves gasping for air, “I can’t breathe.”

 Isaiah speaking to the people in Babylonian exile utterly rejects this blame the victim theology, arguing if this is God’s judgment, than you have paid double the cost for any wrong on your part. What type of God would exact such a punishment? What type of system kills unarmed black youth, or an African American man selling cigarettes on the street? Isaiah knows how outrageous such a verdict is.

 In direct opposition to this punitive theology, blaming those who suffer, Isaiah comes with these words, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem”. Where others offer judgment, Isaiah says, God’s love and justice is with you. Others make excuses, rationalize and justifying the exile of Babylon, the exile of women seeking safety in shelters, the exile of those suffering depression from an unrelenting, time consuming pace, the exile of those who find themselves alone in a crowd, the exile of young African Americans and people of color who feel disenfranchised and judged simply for walking down the street, the exile of those whose sexual orientation remains forbidden and unwelcome, the exile of facing loss in a season that makes no room for loss. Isaiah’s words of comfort are a direct challenge to the theology and systems that would make us comfortable with the status quo of exclusion, judgment and injustice.

 But, Isaiah does not end with merely challenging the status quo of judgment and blame. Isaiah says, we have a role to play; we have a part in making God’s comfort a reality in our time and our day. “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”. Years later, John the Baptist lifts up the prophetic mantle with a mix of judgment for those denying the justice of God and comfort for those who long for the justice of God to be a reality. Mark begins his Gospel by referring to John with a quote from Isaiah, “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” To be sure this can be a discomforting comfort. It is discomforting to those who take solace in a punitive theology of judgment and blame. It is discomforting to those who benefit from the status quo, refusing to look at the underlying causes for the suffering which exists.

 It can also be a discomforting, comfort to those who suffer, because it means there is an alternative to living in exile, longing for a world of compassion and caring. There is an alternative to the narrative of hopelessness we have come to accept, the narrative of our own inadequacy, inability and insufficiency. Prepare the Way of the Lord. Each of us has a role to play. It may be as simple as welcoming someone new to our community, our church, our family.

This past week I visited with a man who emigrated from Somalia at the age of 18. He had no formal education, but in a short ten years, finished high school, earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree and has begun working on a PhD. He told me that when he started school at University of Wisconsin in River Falls, no one would give him the time of day. He would say hello and students would simply turn away. One day he saw another black man in the cafeteria. The man was from Kenya. When the man learned he was a fellow African the man burst into tears, having experienced the same rejection, living far from home, with no idea what to do. “I cannot breathe”. “Prepare the way of the Lord” says Isaiah. Sometimes it can be as simple as opening your heart, and creating a welcoming presence.

 This is how God’s love and justice takes root in our lives and our world. Whatever challenges we face, whatever obstacles might be in our way, whether they be personal or whether they be systemic, Isaiah knows they and we are like grass that withers and flowers that fade. Suffering and loss will never have the final say.

 It is the God of love, justice and compassion who has the final word. It is the God of discomforting, comfort who calls us to lift our voices with tidings of Good News for all those who cannot breathe. It may be the Good News found in a protest movement or the good news of a cup of coffee at table, simply listening to the loneliness and the heart ache of a friend. It is the God of discomforting, comfort who leads us gently as a mother sheep.

**Isaiah 40: 1-11**

***Isaiah may have been a single individual when the prophet first began challenging the powerful with the power of God’s love. But, over the years Isaiah become a movement with one successor after the other. Our lesson today comes from what is known as Second Isaiah and is spoken to people who are exiles in Babylon. Unlike First Isaiah who warned of judgment to those who earlier were ignoring the covenant of God’s love, Second Isaiah refutes the application of judgment to exiles in Babylon and instead speaks about God’s comfort.***

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." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 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.

**Mark 1:1-8**

***Mark begins telling the story of Jesus by connecting Jesus and John the Baptist with the prophetic tradition of Israel. In today’s lesson, Mark invites us to see John as one spoken of by Isaiah, preparing the way for the Good News of God’s love and justice revealed in Jesus Christ.***

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."