



## **"SEEDS OF HOPE ROOTED IN THE SOIL OF ADVERSITY" - ISAIAH 40:1-5**

*By: Brenton Miles Brock*

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Comfort is a luxury. As people of color in the United States of America, we know all too well what it's like to navigate uncomfortable living conditions. A brief recollection of discomfoting lived experiences in African Americans' history attests to our adverse realities. Beginning with coming to North America as slaves (1619), the rise of the cotton industry (1793), Civil War (1861), Emmett Till's murder (1955), Civil Rights Act (1964), Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination (1968), Trayvon Martin's death (2012), the present day influx of mass incarceration and the present political moment, all remind us of the discomfoting life for people of color in this country. Life for us has been no crystal stair. Our lived experience has made us intimately familiar with the contours of the wilderness. In spite of discomfoting realities we have oftentimes created prophetic strategies that provide comfort. During this Advent season, let's focus on three modalities of divine comfort that serve as prophetic strategy: Hope, Justice, and Jesus! Our text highlights how a message of comfort in uncomfortable situations becomes a prophetic strategy. It provided divine comfort to the Israelites and our ancestors, and now us.

### **Hope as a seed of Comfort**

God gives Isaiah a message of hope which provides comfort to an uncomfortable people. These people were held captive by systems that were oppressive and sought to dehumanize their very existence. Hope, our first modality of comfort, becomes help for this believing community. Hope as help is not unfamiliar to African Methodism — we have always had the help of our hope. We, too, know what it's like to believe in the idea that change will come.

Here in this text, Isaiah pronounces the reality of forthcoming deliverance— the idea that one day the children of Israel would be released from Cyrus’ captivity. Hope then becomes a prophetic strategy to provide comfort in the presence of discomfoting realities. Hope is our help in and through discomfoting living experiences. Hope is your help!!

### **Justice as a seed of comfort**

Our text highlights God offering hope to their discomfoting systematic-oppressed lives, which makes us realize the necessity of hope. However, having hope in *what*, becomes the next obvious question with an ambiguous answer. God speaks through Isaiah to situate hope with an eschatological view, which centralizes democratic justice. A new prophetic view of the glory of God is introduced.

Isaiah preaches in metaphors which depict social reformation through ideals of democratic justice. According to Isaiah, this is the glory of God. Isaiah’s idea of justice is not merely a romanticized emotional response to music, nor is it a social gospel which falsely advertises financial prosperity and abundance as the only fruits of the Spirit. Justice in this text equated with God’s glory, which leads us to another question during this Advent season: what does democratic justice in this particular passage look like in a practical way?

### **Justice today is:**

- valleys being lifted up, which translates into public affordable healthcare being accessible to all people.
- mountains are made low when the financially rich seek to help the poor among us.
- uneven or unfair grounds leveled when black and brown people are not massly incarcerated.
- rough places made plain when the legal system protects society’s most vulnerable.
- valleys lifted up when public inner city school systems have updated textbooks.
- mountains made low when gentrification ceases to encroach historically black communities.
- uneven or unfair grounds leveled when women have access to equal paying jobs.
- rough places made plain when citizens returning to society after incarceration have access to jobs.
- valleys lifted up when black LGBTQ people have safe spaces in both church and society.
- mountains made low when democracy is pronounced and practiced.

The Israelites and our ancestors had a hope rooted in democratic justice, and for us this is God's glory! The glory of God and its manifestation isn't merely a commitment to cultural and traditional ideologies, but a commitment to a hope that prepares for the glory of God through justice.

### **Jesus as our Comforter**

Hope and justice are both prophetic strategies of comfort. However, our Comforter is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ embodies both hope and justice. The African Methodist Episcopal Church knows firsthand how life has presented us with "tacks and splinters", making life on earth a living hell. Like the Israelites in the text, our founding members lived in uncomfortable situations, being marginalized and rendered invisible by white clergymen who sought to keep sanctuaries segregated.

Terms such as "discomfort" or "uncomfortable" can be limiting when depicting the adversity blacks met while kneeling at the altar. They were beaten and removed from prayer because of the color of their skin. This theological white supremacist policing brutality in church, made real to them the uncomfortable adverse realities that make us identify today with the plight of the Israelites in this text. We feel the pains of captivity, bondage, and a sense of being in the wilderness. In the face of adverse and uncomfortable times, our ancestors took the comforting words of Isaiah to have prophetic meaning, strategy, and comfort. This sustained them in this wilderness life experience.

Both the Israelites and our ancestors climbed to reach political landings, to turn cultural corners, and trailblaze through dark and deserted places where there seemed to be no light. The Israelites sojourned through this soil of adversity with a divine prophetic comfort, not just of hope and justice, but in *Jesus Christ*.

Jesus is and has been our comfort and our Comforter. In the face of adversity the Israelites were comforted in knowing that Jesus was returning and they would see deliverance and justice. Likewise, our ancestors who left St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church found comfort in knowing that Jesus was with them, and that Jesus would return. Both the Israelites and our ancestors were committed to God's promise: The promise of deliverance. The promise of justice. The promise of God's return. Jesus is both *presence* and *promise* for both sects of people. Jesus was and is a prophetic comfort that was with them as they faced adversity, as they walked out of Egypt on

dry land, and in the captivity highlighted in our text. How has Jesus been with us? Beloved, Jesus embodies seeds of hope and justice, which provide comfort in uncomfortable situations.

### **Today's Charge**

When the adversary seeps through unjust politics, remember our Divine Comfort and Comforter.

When darkness is seemingly all around, you have hope in our Comforter:

- the Comforter who supresses our own understanding.
- the Comforter who shows up when everything else does not.
- the Comforter who is a light at the end of the tunnel.
- the Comforter whom we call a Wonderful Counselor.
- the Comforter who is both author and finisher of our faith.

Who is the great Comforter? The Comforter who puts us together when life seeks to pull us apart.

The Comforter who loves when we can't seem to love ourselves.

Beloved, in this season of Advent remember:

Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ, our righteousness; We dare not trust the sweetest frame, But wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ, the solid Rock, we stand; All other ground is sinking sand, All other ground is sinking sand.

**Amen**