

Isaiah 40:1-11 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 forever. 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.

Sermon: Without the Noise of Words

If I were to say to you, "My beer is Rheingold the dry beer" - could you complete the thought?

Think of Rheingold whenever you buy beer. It's not bitter, not sweet, it's the extra dry treat -- Won't you try extra dry Rheingold beer?"

If you know that, you're either my age, a Mets fan, or simply a connoisseur of extra dry beer. I would not want to go up against you in a game of Trivial Pursuit.

There are certain songs, sayings, phrases, and bits of verbal flotsam that drift in and out of our awareness but never really get completely cleansed from the undercurrents of our consciousness. Many of these have been put there by people who want to sell us something. No where, in the history of humankind, has anyone spent more time and money to produce brief sticky notes in your brain than has the modern advertising industry. The harder you try to resist, the deeper these verbal burs bury themselves. There is no escape.

I have done an exercise with different confirmation classes to find out what they have memorized, what fills their minds. It's quite amazing how a child who might be having trouble in school remembering a few dates in history or math equations can give you a word perfect five minute recitation of rap or pop lyrics - lyrics that are likely unintelligible to the adult listener to begin with - and thank God for that little favor.

I feel very old when I say that - after all, my favorite verse of Bob Dylan's Desolation Row is the tenth:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday

(About the time the door knob broke)

When you asked how I was doing

Was that some kind of joke?

So I'm not in any position to criticize another's taste in music or the lyrics they have put to memory.

But all this junk and jumble that occupies our minds is a worry to me. I wonder, how in the midst of that, any of us find the quiet to hear what Thomas à Kempis called the voice that speaks "without the noise of words." And I don't think of this as an abstract question, but a very practical one, and I'll tell you why. I'm scared.

I know at Christmas the angel said, Fear Not!, but that's not me - I'm full of fear.

I hear the prophet cry say: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. But in my head the another voice crys out: All people are grass, their constancy is

like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, surely the people are grass.

Like the character Bob in the movie, What About Bob, my fears are almost without number. There is a great scene in that movie where Bob is having a just before bedtime conversation with a young boy who hates the dark and is beset with a fear of death. And the boy says to Bob something along the lines of - what else is there to be afraid of. Of course Bob rattles off a list of about forty other things to be afraid of, including an uncontrollable urge to shout random insults at other people, and somehow that makes the boy feel much better.

It's not darkness or death I fear - I'm afraid of fear - When I read that FDR said we have nothing to fear but fear itself, my thought is, what more do you need. I fear the thought of having an accident or a stroke or some other affliction that upends my mental equilibrium - that sends my mind careening down a road of uncontrolled thought like a car skidding on an icy highway - you can't put on the brakes, it's useless to turn the steering wheel - you just have to ride it out.

If I faced that kind of challenge, would I have the mental and spiritual resources to be calm and not fearful, confident and not panic - to find a communion with God when all my capabilities have been stripped away and I cannot distract myself from the reality of my situation.

Maybe I spend too much time in hospitals and nursing homes, and, in fact, this past week I ran into a hospice chaplain at a local nursing home and asked her this very question - what do you do to prepare yourself for this stage in your life - that time when your mind is your only constant companion and you basically have to draw on what is within you because you have been detached from the world of activity and distractions.

In that situation, I think, knowing My beer is Rheingold the dry beer" or all ten verses of Desolation Row will not be of much help. In that moment, I will hope my mind can summon forth the psalm we have on our prayer cards for this week:

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear.
The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid.

We all hear about saving money for retirement, maybe some of us have bought long-term-care insurance, and you would consider a person foolish who didn't put some money in the bank for a rainy day. To read the psalms, to enter into the world of these ancient conversations of faith - that is putting money in the bank for future peace of mind - that is the kind of long-term-care each of us can give ourselves.

I don't want to suggest that the salvation of God comes because we do something to make it happen - or even that communion with God depends upon our reaching out to God. No, on the contrary, Christmas tells the story of God reaching out to a world that really had little interest in his coming. We cannot force communion with God, but we can cooperate - we can practice a spirituality that helps us be open to God, that is eager to receive God, and that quiets the cacophony of noise in our heads so we can hear the voice that speaks without the noise of words.

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear.
The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid.