

Comforted and Challenged

Isaiah 51:1-6

Romans 12: 1-8

Aug 27, 2023

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Isaiah 51:1-6

Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be forever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

Romans 12: 1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

--

Yin and yang. Dark and light. White and black. Top and bottom. In and out. The Chinese symbol of a circle with two interlocking black and white swirls, or teardrops, one black and one white, and a dot of the opposite color is a familiar figure. The symbol is a 4000 year old philosophical concept which represents the interconnectedness of the world, particularly the natural world. There can be no positive without a negative, no open without closed, no light without shadow. There is harmony and balance between opposites with complementary forces. The yin and yang is essential for the natural order and the well-being of everything.ⁱ

In his article, '*The Yin and Yang of God and Humanity*',ⁱⁱ Chinese-American New Testament scholar K.K. Yeo, speaks of the yin-yang philosophy as an alternate way of thinking of the truth about God and humanity.

The balance of opposites is not only a Chinese philosophy, it well describes two very different messages, lessons, teachings of Scripture. As God's created and beloved children, as

people of faith, we are both challenged and comforted over and over in the stories of our faith ancestors, in the wisdom of the psalms and proverbs, in prophetic words and actions, in the gospels, and the ministry of the apostles. We are repeatedly challenged and comforted.

We hear of God's comforting lovingkindness:

-He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.ⁱⁱⁱ

-For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.^{iv}

-Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.^v

Just as we hear of God's challenging call to follow, call to discipleship:

-"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."^{vi}

-"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."^{vii}

-"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."^{viii}

Isaiah spoke prophetic words of God's comfort to a people in exile, people who had suddenly been uprooted from their homes, their temple, the world they knew in a time of political turmoil and upheaval. Deported, displaced and disoriented, they were in despair. Broken hearted and defeated, the exiles needed life-giving hope and a new vision. With reminders of who and Whose they were as children of Abraham and Sarah, as descendants of God's promise, Isaiah offered comfort and reassurance, and in very specific ways. He didn't speak in simple platitudes: 'don't worry, it'll all work out, you'll be fine.'

Isaiah was clear and particular in planting the new vision in their hearts and minds. All the places that have been turned to waste will become a new Eden. What is now the barrenness of the desert will become a rich, lush garden. Where justice has been lost, it will rise as a light to the people. Where chains and captivity now oppress, there will be freedom, gladness and thanksgiving in the Lord's everlasting salvation and deliverance.

Those same comforting promises speak today to those exiled from their homes, their community by wildfires that burn away life, land and history in Hawaii and Canada, to those in bombed, war-torn Ukraine, to those in Zimbabwe living in fear of the political unrest, to all the places where gun violence has torn apart families and communities, to the good beauty of creation now polluted, abused and neglected, to everyone everywhere exiled by burdens of pain, grief, of need. The view can be so crowded with outrage and fear, pain and loss, that there is no room to imagine what God might be up to.

In God's time waste, barrenness, injustice and oppression will become lush Edens of justice, redemption. Scarcity will become abundance.

Those same comforting promises speak to the Church in this time of a radical cultural change, a time in which the church, the country, is a divisive culture, a time when membership, attendance and volunteerism for anything was already dwindling and is now at a faster speed in our post-Covid- isolation world. We are exiled from the church we cling to with a sentimental love and fond memories of overflowing Sunday school classes, of multiple choirs, of crowded pews, of more mission, education and social opportunities.

Isaiah says, 'listen, look, give heed,' the Lord will and does comfort now, and in time to come.

Yin and yang. Comfort and challenge.

Both Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr^{ix} and journalist Finley Peter Dunne^x are credited with the wonderful idiom “comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable” that holds the yin yang biblical balance of comfort and challenge. It is the nature, the message, of the gospel to offer hope and comfort to those who are hurting, struggling, while standing strong against injustice, want and oppression, and to afflict, to challenge, us to live into the teachings and greatest commandment of Jesus Christ as we promised in our baptism and beyond. We are comforted in part to comfort others. We are challenged in part to know the challenges of others.

Paul, certainly a man who knew times of challenge and comfort, has a unique way of challenging us by calling us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, to live so faithfully and intentionally that everything we do, act, move, think, care for our bodies, use our bodies in service, humility and kindness for others, at every single moment, to be as an acceptable worship to God. Paul’s challenge is an always one, a moral vision for a lifetime, as anything else is to conform to the world that is not the kingdom of God. His challenge to us is to live as a daily offering to God by using the spiritual gifts given to us in grace.

The world all around the believers in Paul’s Rome was saturated with images, behaviors, practices, ideas, attitudes and social pressures that made their bodies, their lifestyles, living sacrifices comfortable to the way of the world. Paul’s challenge was to instead be transformed as a living sacrifice to God. The details are different, yet 2000 years later our world is saturated with images, behaviors, practices, ideas, attitudes and social pressures that seek to make our bodies, our lifestyles, living sacrifices comfortable to the ways of the world. Paul’s words remain true for us today, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

We are challenged to be living sacrifices and living as one body in Christ, to let go of the comforts that encourage us to think more highly of ourselves than we should, to use our spiritual gifts wisely and generously, to act in ways of faith, of outreach, of our promises. We are challenged to face the times in which we live, to renew our minds to discern the will of God come what may in the world around us, in the lives of others, and in the changing seasons of the Church.

Yin and yang. Comfort and challenge. Blest be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.thoughtco.com/yin-and-yang-629214>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23899269>

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 147:3

^{iv} Isaiah 49:13

^v Matthew 5:4

^{vi} Matthew 16:24

^{vii} Romans 8:18

^{viii} James 1:2-4

^{ix} Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*

^x <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2014/today-in-media-history-mr-dooley-the-job-of-the-newspaper-is-to-comfort-the-afflicted-and-afflict-the-comfortable/>