

A friend of mine does research on children's cancer. One night I was visiting his home when he bounced into the room all excited. "Did you see me on TV?" No, I didn't know he on the evening news. "What did you do?" I asked. He had this big grin on his face, like someone had just given him a gift-wrapped box with a huge bow. He said, "I created leukemia in my laboratory." I said, "And you're proud of this?" Well, it'd never been done before, and it opened new possibilities for treating the disease. God knows anyone who suffers any kind of disease from AIDS to arthritis needs news of comfort.

"Comfort" is the first word of today's first reading. It comforts not just the sick, but a whole society. Israel had been God's chosen people for over a thousand years, living in their own land, worshipping in their own temple, enjoying blessings beyond measure. But now everything had changed. The Assyrians had kidnapped the royal family; they laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and deported the rest of the population to Babylon. God's chosen people suffered in exile for two hundred years--nearly as long as we have been a country; away from home, relatives murdered, children born in exile, temple destroyed, they felt discouraged, destitute, and powerless. Eventually they returned, but first they heard Isaiah's words of comfort. Tell Israel that she has served her term; her penalty is paid; she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. It's over. Imagine the sick hearing the words, "We've found the cure." That's the spirit of today's first reading.

The voice of Isaiah the prophet spoke comfort again this past week in a place I didn't expect to hear it at all. It spoke on the front page of the business section of the *Kansas City Star*. Did you see the article about the Loma Vista Shopping Center? For years we've complained about businesses closing on Blue Ridge. People said Ford Motor owns the Loma Vista Shopping Center and they won't develop it because it's just a tax write-off. We want businesses here; we're nervous about crime and blight. We're discouraged when neighbors move away. Now, one article isn't going to change everything, but it rang with Isaiah's voice of comfort. Here's what it said: The Ford Motor Credit Co. hired the CB Commercial Real Estate Group to do something positive about the property. What happened? Office occupancy in the freestanding building rose from 20% to 80%. Retail occupancy in the shopping center has risen from 65% to 96%. "Comfort, bring comfort to my people," says the Lord.

This passage from Isaiah--sometimes we hear it with the wrong punctuation. We hear: "A voice cries out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" Actually the break comes earlier: "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.'" The voice is not in the wilderness; the way of the Lord is in the wilderness. In the midst of our confusion, our hurt, and our fear, in the midst of our sickness, in the midst of our emotional wilderness we prepare the way of the Lord. We don't have to do away with the wilderness to meet the Lord; God comes to the wilderness; we can meet God here. When we find God in our wilderness our voice will not raise alarm; it will bring comfort.