

Let There Be Peace

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

Advent 2

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Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² 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.

³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁹ 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!'

¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ 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.

I don't know that it's possible for me to convey to you how important this passage is in the Bible. But I have to try. Because if you don't grasp what's at stake here at the beginning of Isaiah 40, then you will miss one of the keys to understanding the whole of Scripture.

If you were to sit down to read Isaiah, the first thing you'd notice is how *huge* it is. 66 chapters long. If you try and read it straight through, like a novel, you will notice that there are gaps—places where scenes and characters unexpectedly change. Thanks to the last 100 years of Biblical scholarship, we know that this is because Isaiah is stitched together from 3 different pieces, written by different authors in different periods of Israel's history. Each tells part of the story of God's people as they struggle under the pressure of foreign military powers.

One of the main gaps in Isaiah is between the last word of chapter 39 and the first word of chapter 40, which we just read. By the end of 39, a feeling of doom hangs over the text. Isaiah warns that the king—and the people with him—will face calamity. The armies of Babylon will close in. Isaiah says to the king, "Days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day shall be carried to Babylon; *nothing shall be left.*" Then, the text goes silent.

That silence—the gap between chapters 39 and 40, was not silent at all. In that gap is the destruction of the entire city of Jerusalem and with it a way of life. The Babylonian armies marched into Jerusalem and seized it. Thousands were butchered. Bodies were desecrated. Archaeological evidence says that the entire city of Jerusalem was leveled.

I don't know what comes to your mind when you hear about something like the fall of Jerusalem. I confess that, for me, my first response is a bit of emotional remove. After all, conquests like this were just a part of life in what we call "old times." Life was nasty, brutish, and short, and people and armies did horrible things to each other. But does it matter to me? Does it matter what Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians did to Isaiah's people?

Before you write it off, I want to show you a few pictures:

- *Image of Hiroshima*
- *Image of Dresden*
- *Image of Ukraine*
- *Image of Tigray (Ethiopia)*
- *Image of Myanmar*

Maybe it is hard to feel close to those women and men and children who lived and suffered so much 2500 years ago. Or maybe it's not. Maybe we can understand what it's like to have lives of your loved ones taken. We can access what it feels like when we are afraid that human brutality is winning over human goodness. We can even feel what it was like for our ancestors to watch as the Temple was destroyed. The Temple, the home of God—the God who had saved them from slavery and journeyed with them all the years in the wilderness—the Temple to which people came to be present with the God who was present with them. We can know what it's like when something sacred is desecrated. God had promised our ancestors Abraham and Jacob and David, "I will always be with you." The Babylonian armies had destroyed everything. Their homes. Their food. Their sanctuary. Their lives. Even their story. *There was nothing left.*

Isaiah never discusses the fall of Jerusalem directly, but there is plenty in Scripture to document this catastrophe. Jeremiah sees it. Psalm 137 mourns "by the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept." Read the rage of Job, who loses everything. Read about Rachel, who refuses to be comforted. Read the book of Lamentations. The Scriptures hold on to the memory and the emotional devastation of Exile. Exile is not just death, it is the death of anything and everything that brings comfort to the human spirit.

Every year, in Advent, we sing a particular song. Its roots are in 8th century monasticism. Whenever we sing it, always guts me. The first few lines of this song, in its minor key, hold all of the despair and the desperation and the hopelessness.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here...*

The silence at the end of chapter 39 is what makes the first word of chapter 40 so breathtaking.

"Comfort," Isaiah says. "O comfort my people," says your God.

I've always said—and I believe this to my core—that *words make worlds*. We must not use words irresponsibly: we can't call up down or say that what is wrong is right. But words can make things. In faith, words help us find something that has been hidden, words reveal something that we cannot see, help us hear voices we cannot hear.

"Comfort, O comfort my people." That is *God speaking*. The writer of this passage in Isaiah, Walter Brueggemann says, did something remarkable—this writer "violated the entire perceptual field of his community." How? Isaiah comforts the disconsolate. Isaiah addresses Rachel, who refused all comfort; Isaiah speaks into the depths of Job's anguish; Isaiah tells the mourners in Babylon that the time has come to pick up your harps again and sing.

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.

God will bring you home. Your story is not over.

And this word Isaiah uses to announce the return is "Comfort." We use this word like we're talking about a pair of slippers. But this word comfort means "to strengthen." To make strong those who feel weak. To lift up those who have been made to feel low. To fill the hungry with good things. Comfort is a Divine Presence who knit you together in your mother's womb and knows you by name. Comfort is a shepherd who gathers you in their arms, and gently leads you home. Comfort is a love that no power, or principality, or ruler ever defeats.

Five hundred years after the exile, a man named John—who was wild, but oddly attuned, like Isaiah, to the presence of God in the most unlikely places—John stood knee deep in the water of the Jordan River. And he knew, like Isaiah, that the hidden God does not remain hidden forever, that the silent God would not remain silent any longer. So he drew forward the words of Isaiah, the same words that had once made a world. He said "Prepare the way of the Lord. Someone is coming, and with him will come the whole power—the whole *comfort*—of God. And all of us will see it together."

*O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appears.*