

COMFORT MY PEOPLE
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 40: 1-11 (NEB)

Comfort, comfort my people; it is the voice of your God; speak tenderly to Jerusalem and tell her this, that she has fulfilled her term of bondage, that her penalty is paid; she has received at the Lord's hand double measure for all her sins.

There is a voice that cries; "Prepare a road for the Lord through the wilderness, clear a highway across the desert for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill brought down; rugged places shall be made smooth and mountain-ranges become a plain."

Thus shall the glory of the Lord be revealed, and all mankind together shall see it; for the Lord himself has spoken.

A voice says, "Cry," and another asks, "What shall I cry?"

"That all mankind is grass, they last no longer than a flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon them; the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God endures for evermore."

You who bring Zion good news, up with you to the mountain-top; lift up your voice and shout, you who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift it up fearlessly; cry to the cities of Judah, "Your God is here." Here is the Lord God coming in might, coming to rule with his right arm. His recompense comes with him, he carries his reward before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd and gather them together with his arm; and lead the ewes to water.

Understanding this second prophet with the name Isaiah requires that we appreciate the historical context of his words. Very simply, the prophets of old, men like first Isaiah and Jeremiah, had correctly seen the fate of Israel and Judah under the army of Babylon. They had tried to warn the nation that because of its apostasy God had abandoned the people to the inevitable consequences of conquest. They understood that the problem was not simply that of "sin." The problem was a blindness of the leadership to the values and principles that they sacrificed in order to make an unholy alliance with foreign countries. The nation was weakened by political

and religious neglect of the poor who lay at their feet, huddled in shelters, camped beneath bridges and overpasses. It is a scene all too familiar in 21st Century America.

Their words proved all too true, and the nation was held captive under the shackles of the Babylonians. The religious, political, and social leadership of Jerusalem was carted off to Babylon and held in bondage. There were nearly 10,000 of them. They were kept there nearly 50 years, two generations. Their hearts ached to be home. Their souls reeled under the Babylonian's militant theocracy, especially the idolatry of the war god, Marduk.

This is how we simplify the story, and the assumption is that just as soon as the Jews were free to leave, they all took the next stage to Jerusalem. But this does not tell the whole story. After the initial shock of resettlement the Jewish community thrived. In fact, the Jewish community in Babylon would create part the future of Judaism that is still with us today. The prophet Ezekiel established a Torah academy in the Babylonian town of Sura that survived until 1001 CE. As a matter of fact there were already Jewish synagogues and schools with many prophets, scholars, and leaders when the exiles arrived. Their scholarship would eventually create the *Babylonian Talmud*, offering precise and comprehensive teachings on the Torah. Some scholars believe that Babylon became a kind of second Israel or “a home away from home.”¹ You can visit Sura and old Babylon by booking a flight to Iraq.

So we may be puzzled by Deutero-Isaiah's words. He begins by speaking tenderly to Jerusalem, the prize city of David – the city of peace. He tells her to be

¹ For a very fine and concise history read “Babylon and Beyond,” at *Jewish History.org*; <http://www.jewishhistory.org/babylon-and-beyond>. Downloaded on 12/03/2011.

comforted because the price for her sin has been paid. It almost sounds as if the city will be restored and all of the Jews could go home again. The way will be cleared for a safe transport. Bridges will be built, streets repaved, and short cuts will be created. Indeed, Yahweh will carry the young ones in his arms, herding the flock, and leading them beside still waters. Before you know it we will all be singing, “Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall.”

Perhaps that is the hope that Deutero-Isaiah offered. But I am not so sure. It clearly did not happen that way, especially given the history of Judaism in Babylonia. It does not take into consideration the many exiles that the Jews would encounter in future history, or the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem again. The Babylonian Exile was one of many Diasporas the Jews would experience. I also wonder at the text itself, suggesting that Deutero-Isaiah was not predicting a homecoming in the City of David, but rather a recognition that the Sacred One is with us wherever we are. The Jews were flourishing in Babylonia even as the prophet spoke. Here are the clues that I offer.

This morning’s reading is like two bookends. The first is the word of “Comfort, comfort my people.” The second is the metaphor of the good shepherd caring for the ewes. Why, in the midst of these words of comfort and hope for the future, does the prophet announce, “That all mankind is grass, they last no longer than a flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon them; the grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God endures for evermore.” Things change. People are born and people die. Both are movements of God. Indeed, “the breath of the Lord blows upon them; the grass withers, the

flowers fade.” Where have we heard that kind of talk before? In the book of Genesis God’s breath moves across the depths and order is created out of chaos. In the book of Ezekiel the prophet is taken to the valley of dry bones where God breathes upon them and they become a standing army. Now we find Isaiah associating the breath of life with the bloom and fading of grass and flower. Every one of us, regardless of your address, will follow the way of big blue stem and sunflower, buffalo grass and lavender columbine, Kentucky bluegrass and prairie coneflower. Whether or not we remove ourselves to Jerusalem this reality will follow us. If not, it will lead the way!

Then the prophet makes a simple and bold statement. The Word of God endures forever. Through all of the passages of human beings and their civilizations the Spirit of Life prevails, resourcing people, refreshing tired communities, envisioning a future of humankind in freedom and dignity. The Creator takes mud and fashions life, cleans and binds the wounded, and remolds grief into hope. The prophet affirms that all of this happens regardless of geography, religious affiliation, or political allegiance. There is a constancy of Hope that brought me into this world and will guide me out.

The second clue is related to the first. Deutero-Isaiah says, “Behold your God,” or in the translation I read this morning, “Your God is here.” Right here in Babylon! Right here in the midst of changing seasons! Right here in the tidal pull of life and death! If we think that God is only found in the Jerusalem, or Mecca, or Rome we have not understood the prophet. If we think that the Holy is only found in church, synagogue, mosque, basilica, or temple we have a very narrow tiny circle of

faith. If we believe that the Power of Life is only turned on Sunday mornings or Friday nights, we are without light about 86% of the time.

Deutero-Isaiah reflects what the Jews had learned in captivity. Their exile forced them to rethink their faith and open the windows of hope in places they had only feared in the past. To put it another way, they learned how to be faithful exiles. The truth is that when the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem only a very small minority would do so.² The Jews would continue the pattern of faithful exile in Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, Poland, Germany, and America. To paraphrase an old country song, the Jews kept finding God in all of the wrong places.

I know many people who are in exile today. They are people who feel exiled from their religious communities, exiled from their families, exiled from their country, exiled from their vocation, and exiled from their bodies. I am not equating their trauma with the Babylonian Captivity or the horrors of the holocaust. But I know a lot of people who no longer feel at home with themselves or their future.

I am thinking of people who are dislocated in their marriage, years after the divorce papers were signed and filed at the courthouse. Consider our friends who are expatriates of their own bodies, fighting the ravages of cancer or Alzheimer's disease. Think of all of the so-called aliens in the United States today. They surely cannot feel welcome. I have worked with or counseled many who are deported into prison or addiction of one kind or another. Or, if you please, try to imagine the harassment of and violence to gay and lesbian teenagers, whose suicide rate is double that of their

² Ibid.

peers. The list could go on, but I think you all know something of exile, or isolation, or social quarantine, or banishment.

The promise of the prophet is that of Emmanuel, “God with us.” It is sometimes difficult to believe but no matter where we are grace is possible. In the best of times or the worst of times grace is possible. In the seasons of prosperity and recession grace happens all around us. No matter where you live – or who you live with – grace is ever conceivable. Even when we do not quite get things right grace enfolds us and gives us comfort. It reminds me of a story told by Jeffrey Zaslow.

“Years ago, my father coached a team of eight-year-olds. He had a few excellent players, and some who just couldn't get the hang of baseball. Dad's team didn't win once all season. But in the last inning of the last game, his team was only down by a run. There was one boy on the team who had never been able to hit the ball--or catch it. With two outs, it was his turn to bat. He surprised the world and got a single!

The next batter was the team slugger. Finally, Dad's players might win a game. The slugger connected, and as the boy who hit the single ran to second, he saw the ball coming toward him. Not so certain of baseball's rules, he caught it. Final out! Dad's team lost! Quickly, my father told his team to cheer. The boy beamed. It never occurred to him that he lost the game. All he knew was he had hit the ball and caught it--both for the first time. His parents later thanked my dad. Their child had never even gotten in a game before that season.

We never told the boy exactly what happened. We didn't want to ruin it for

him. And till this day, I'm proud of what my father did that afternoon."³

Well, that's a cute story and I know that it does not measure up to the challenges of my friends who are dying or feel displaced from life. The promise of Deutero-Isaiah is that when we are exiled we will be surprised by grace as we adapt and work our way toward new meanings. We may have to knock on many doors before one is opened to us. In the midst of broken dreams we will have to keep the vision of hope. I think of Kelli Russell Agodon's poem, "Snapshot of a Lump:"

I imagine Nice and topless beaches,
 women smoking and reading novels in the sun.
 I pretend I am comfortable undressing
 in front of men who go home to their wives,
 in front of women who have seen
 twenty pairs of breasts today,
 in front of silent ghosts who walked
 through the same glass doors before me,
 who hoped the doctors would find it soon enough,
 the surgery, pills and chemo could save them.

Today, they target my lump
 with a small round sticker, a metal capsule
 embedded beneath clear plastic.
 I am asked to wash off my deodorant,
 wrap a lead apron around my waist,
 pose for the nurse, for the white walls –
 that "come hither" look in my eyes.
This is my first time being photographed topless.
 I tell the nurse, *Will I be the centerfold*
or just another playmate?

My breast is pressed flat – a torpedo,
 a pyramid, a triangle, a rocket on this altar;
 this can't be good for anyone.
 Finally, the nurse, winded
 from fumbling smiles,
 says, "Don't breathe or move."
 A flash and my breast is free,

³ Jeffrey Zaslow, "Tell Me About It," (1990), Sermon Illustrations.Com, <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/grace.html>, downloaded 12/03/2011.

but only for a moment.

In the waiting room, I sit between magazines,
 an article on Venice,
 health charts, people in white.
 I pretend I am comfortable watching
 other women escorted off to a side room,
 where results are given with condolences.

I imagine leaving here
 with negative results and returned lives.
 I imagine a future trip to France,
 to novels I will write and days spent
 beneath a blue and white sun umbrella,
 waves washing against the shore like promises.⁴

We are not told in the poem the results of the mammogram. We are not told if she must undergo surgery or radiation, or even if she dies. What we are told is that she must work through her suffering with imagination and promise. She can and must conceive of a future traveling, writing, and basking in the sun, washed by the waves of the ocean. This is all that the prophet, Isaiah, can offer us. This is all that the season of Advent grants us. In this world of withering grass and flowers God is here, in the very midst of us. This is the hope and the foundation of freedom's future. This is the faith of the exiled.

Finis

⁴ Kelli Russell Agodon, "Snapshot of a Lum," *Good Poems for Hard Times*, Garrison Keillor, editor (New York: Viking Press, 2005), pp 186-187.