

Comfort While We Wait

Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

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The Bible has three main narratives that give meaning to everything else: exodus, exile, and then crucifixion/resurrection.

In the OT it's either exodus from slavery or it's exile into bondage.

Exodus and exile are similar stories – in both we are suffering, and our world is hurting. Egypt is when we suffer in ways that are bigger than ourselves and we can't do anything about it. We find ourselves in Egypt when we are caught, in bondage, and can't get loose.

But there are also times when we're in a bad place, maybe a hurt-filled place, but we got here because we ignored God, or took God for granted, and believed too little, did nothing to serve God or serve our hurting neighbors. We just assumed that God was always on our side, and always saw things from our point of view. As a result, we are in exile, and we don't like it. Perhaps we're mad about it. Or perhaps we're simply depressed.

We know we are caught in something larger than ourselves and we can't get loose, or we know we got our own selves into something. Either way we are hurting and in despair. The upshot is we find ourselves cut-off from the God who gives life and hope.

This morning Isaiah speaks to us. Chapters 1-39 of Isaiah are warnings about what will happen if we keep turning our back on God. We will end up in exile. But

after chapter 39 there is a long pause that lasted 70 years. And then beginning here with these verses from the beginning of chapter 40 God breaks the silence and speaks to God's people in exile.

The first words are, "Comfort, comfort, my people. Speak tenderly."

Can you hear that?

Let's be honest. We're in a mess and now there are consequences. And God says, "Cry to Jerusalem that she has served her term; that her penalty is paid." In other words, her sin is forgiven, and its consequences are healed. There is forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness deals with the sin, but after the sin is forgiven there is still the damage to be faced. Healing is about the damage. And sometimes healing takes awhile.

And as usual, it's complicated. It's always complicated, isn't it? Israel is a thousand miles from home – at least a thirty day's journey. And in between are mountains, valleys, and all sorts of difficult terrain. To put it differently, I'm in such a bad place that God's forgiveness and healing is still not going to be enough to get me back home.

Hear what God says. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough place made plain" (40:4).

You've seen the big trucks on the highway carrying an extra-large/extra-wide load of something? Going before them will be a pickup or car or two both giving a warning to other vehicles but also to make sure the way ahead is safe and passable. Often such special loads or big loads have someone who goes several miles ahead making sure the route is passable; that the overpasses are high enough

and that any corners or curves are not too sharp. Then they radio or call back and say, “Come on; the road is good.”

Well, the prophet Isaiah says that someone is going ahead of you making sure the road is good. Your way home is going to be smoother than you thought. Sure, it will be long, and it will take awhile but it will not be as impossible or as impassable as you have imagined.

But there’s something else. Perhaps, you’re thinking to yourself, “I don’t know if I’m up to this. I don’t know if I can do it. Either because of despair or depression or both, I don’t have the strength to make the journey home. I don’t have the strength to face the future. I’m tired. I’m exhausted. I feel like I’m the burned-up grass that was in my yard this summer.”

Hear the prophet of God, “The grass withers; the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8). To put it differently, you’re not going to have to do this by your own strength. You’re going to do this in God’s strength.

Further on in this same chapter, is one of the greatest passages of the entire Bible; the prophet says, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (40:28-31).

Can you hear that?

But it's still complex. Layers upon layers of problems – consequences and damage, distance and difficulty, and our own weakness and despair. But now – and I'm getting down to it – fear. It's not only the fear of facing others, our friends, and our family. But we have to face God. Don't forget that Israel believed that anyone who saw God would die. Not because God struck them down. But because God is utterly other; utterly holy. Back in chapter 6 when Isaiah found himself in the Temple in the presence of Almighty God he was petrified and speechless.

And it is true, sooner or later we have to face up to God. We must stop looking at the ground and look up and meet God's gaze, ashamed as we are, or afraid, or angry, or tired.

The prophet says, "Here is your God!" (40:9). Yes, we have to meet God and we already know that God is mighty and powerful, overcoming valleys and flattening mountains, repairing the damage that has been done. Here is God. And we take a deep breath, swallow hard, and look, and God is none other than a shepherd. Isaiah says, "God will feed his flock like a shepherd; God will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep" (40:11).

God takes God's time. God is gently driving us, shepherding us, leading us home. God doesn't push us faster than we can go. God knows we're tired and the journey is long. And when we can't go on anymore, God picks us up and carries us in his arms.

That's how God announces that Israel's exile is over. These are the first words after the long pause from chapter 39 that lasted 70 years in Babylon.

In the Gospels, the first words from John the Baptist are these very same words from Isaiah, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of

the Lord, make his paths straight.” In Mark they are the very first words of the entire Gospel. It has been 400 years since Malachi, the prophet at the end of our Old Testament. Silence for four centuries. Suddenly, a voice in the wilderness crying out, “Prepare the way. Straighten the road. Every valley shall be lifted up. Every hill and mountain shall be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

The gospel tells us that John the Baptist was that voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way. He was the one going ahead of the One who was coming to bring comfort, and forgiveness, and healing. John was preparing the way for Jesus, God incarnate.

And we wait. Habakkuk said, “If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come.” God, the good shepherd is coming. He will lift you in his arms and carry you home.

You don’t have to stay in exile anymore. God wants you home.

Kathleen Norris tells of a friend who told her one day that he’d gotten his life into such a mess that the only way out seemed to be the killing of a person. He had a gun and the only thing that kept him from killing this person was that the person was not alone. So, he had to wait.

But in the waiting, something happened. To use Jesus’ language of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, “He came to himself.” The friend said, “It was right then I decided to get out. This was way over my head.”

And Kathleen Norris writes: “And that is salvation, or at least the beginning of it! The Hebrew word for salvation means literally ‘to make wide’ or ‘to make sufficient,’ and our friend had recognized that the road he had taken was not wide

enough to sustain his life; it was sufficient only as a way leading to death” (from Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p. 19-20).

Sin and suffering constrict our lives – funneling us into increasingly narrow, compressing, and diminishing ways to where we become frozen and locked into a destructive life that is really a kind of living death.

But then we hear the good news of Isaiah and John: God is coming, the road is being widened. Made passable. Made possible. We will have room to move and grow and change. The good shepherd will take us home.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.

*Thanks to Sam Wells for much of the key ingredients in this sermon. See his *be not afraid: Facing Fear with Faith*, pp. 49-54).