

God's People Are Comforted

40 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."

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]

lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b]

lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Mark 1:1-8; The Proclamation of John the Baptist

1 The beginning of the good news^[a] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.^[b]

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,^[c]

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,^[d]
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared^[e] in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with^[f] water; but he will baptize you with^[g] the Holy Spirit."

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Isaiah 40:1-9; Mark 1:1-8

“Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem; Cry Out in the Wilderness”

Kerra Becker English

Isaiah has a way with words. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. 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.

In these first verses, Isaiah calls for comfort for the exiles who have been living quite uncomfortably in Babylon. It was God’s punishment, as they understood it, for Israel’s sin that they were driven far from home by a more powerful conqueror. But now, those who talk about God punishing a city or causing strife between nations are usually on the kind of radio programming that gets skipped over quickly in my car. I find it rather presumptuous to talk about God’s punishments as if we knew exactly what God was thinking, and as if we could determine how God was acting through either natural disasters or human consequences. I always return to an Anne Lamott quote that convicts me every time. She says, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

But I think it was safe for Isaiah to say that the Israelites had been feeling punished by God. Was it because of their sin? Maybe. Were they simply dominated by a more powerful empire? That too. Israelite culture and religion were disrupted, families were displaced, likely some loved ones died because of the hostile takeover, and their beloved city, the heart of this national body was overrun by strangers who brought destruction with them.

So God whispers in Isaiah's ear – Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Don't you think they needed a word of hope? They needed to hear that the worst of it all was over. It amazes me that Jerusalem was still Jerusalem in Exile. The city within them was not destroyed even as they could only imagine that upon their return, it wouldn't, it couldn't possibly be the same.

Jerusalem has been in the news lately – and I'm not going to comment on recent news any more than that. I have been to Jerusalem – but it was more than 20 years ago. My memories have not retained great detail about that trip, and sadly I'm not good at keeping travel notes. But from my own sense of the place and from its crazy history, it is safe to say that you go there to see where religion was born. Jerusalem is a sight of religious awe for three of the largest monotheistic religions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider it a holy city. And it is amazing as an American – where we seem to count history from about the era of the Jamestown settlement forward – to be in a city like Jerusalem that has been a bustling place of human interaction for thousands of years.

Religion seemed to get its unifying characteristics in cities, in the places where people congregated and had to learn how to get along. That's true of government as well. You need order to have a city. Cities then grew to have religious plurality; government power; a variety of trades, businesses and services; sometimes military authority; and then they have to balance the rights and responsibilities of people in order to have even a reasonable sense of peace. Religious institutions often set the guideposts for how our values shape us in the midst of competing interests. It's not enough for me to care about only my own wants and needs, it is beneficial for me to care about my neighbors needs as well when we live side by side.

Jerusalem, or the people from Jerusalem had a spirit inside them for what that looked like. Isaiah was calling that spirit out – but since they were far from home – Isaiah cried out for it in the wilderness. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. The Israelite people already had stories of being in the wilderness. They left slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to get to the Promised Land. They were going to have to go through the wilderness again to get back. The wilderness, unlike the city is a place where life is dangerous and things could go unexpectedly at any minute. Isaiah describes a highway in the wilderness, a transportation miracle of sorts where folks could leave Babylon by a wide and easy route with God’s glory to show them the way.

I’m not sure exactly what this imagery might do for you, but it’s certainly worth pondering. What do you see as your Jerusalem? Your wilderness? Your highway? How will God take care of us when human beings are, as Isaiah says, ‘All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely the people are grass.’ NEVERTHELESS, Isaiah says, the word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah has these grand images about the places God cares for and the people who populate those places as fully dependent on God’s care for the greater whole. The city needs to hear a word of tenderness. The wilderness needs to hear the people crying out for home. The highway is a testament to God’s power to connect – city, wilderness, and the desire of God’s people.

When I was a kid, I know I gave my parents the impression that I was going to be the one who chose to live in the wilderness. I spent hours in my treehouse or wanting to be in the woods, and my hero was Grizzly Adams who lived alone with his animals in a remote cabin. My sister was the one with the singing talent that needed a bigger audience, the kind that cities can provide. But in our adulthood, we both switched roles. I’ve gravitated to city life, or at least the

outskirts of it – preferring to be close to the city, but living and working in nearby towns, and taking advantage of the multitude of things that city life can provide. My sister, on the other hand, lives not only in sparsely populated West Virginia, but has her house in the woods on 60 acres of a mountain that was some of my father’s hunting property. We switch roles on vacation. I go back to the woods. She comes to see me and go to Broadway in Richmond. What I see in this passage from Isaiah is the affirmation that we need both city life that is the hub of being connected, and the wilderness life where we are awed by the wildness of creation, and God is building a highway between the two.

In a number of articles about divided America, our division is painted with a wide and perhaps calloused brush as a city – country split. The city folk feel and vote one way, and the country folk feel and vote another. It’s an old division, but one that requires the voice of tenderness in the city and to hear the cry from the wilderness. I want verse five of this text to speak to our current situation, and call us into a new way of seeing. In it Isaiah imagines, “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

My sister and I had a few young adult disagreements about where the best place was to live. I had trouble understanding why she stayed in the rural area where we grew up; she was none too happy with me for leaving. But over time, we saw each other’s gifts and growth in the places where we ended up being planted. We built a highway between our lives, and learned to appreciate each other’s contexts with greater kindness and gentleness. Isaiah pointed me in that direction this time reading this passage – which I confess is one of my favorite go-to passages when I need to feel God-with-us. It’s a reminder that even a passage that was written to speak to

a people in political and religious Exile, to talk to them about home, can become a very personal reading as well to talk to us about our own sense of “home.”

God cares about us having a sense that we are surrounded by and live within places of holiness – whether it’s in a city like Jerusalem that has worn that mantle wearily for centuries – or whether it’s Ashland that grounds us and calls us to be who we are right here and right now. And whether its by being where we are comfortable or traveling to where we are intimidated and challenged out there in the wildernesses of our own making. So give it some thought this afternoon – Your city? Your wilderness? Your highway? How is God present in the places and surroundings that are part of your everyday world? Amen.