

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
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Isaiah 40:1–11

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing things of the world, speak your eternal word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness 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, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 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. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and rules with a mighty arm; God's reward is with God, and God's recompense before God. God will feed the flock

like a shepherd; God will gather the lambs in God's arms, and carry them in God's bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

About six months or so into the pandemic – way back in 2020, remember that? – I found myself turning to the Old Testament. And in particular, the prophets. Not because there we can find dystopian images of the end of the world, or dire warnings of the world going the wrong way. No, I found myself looking at the prophets of the Old Testament, because they often have a message of hope. They spend time talking about the state of the world and how it is not how God would have it be, where people are oppressed, and people are lonely, and all is not right with the world. They talk about a people in exile and disconnected from the source of all being. But they do not stay there. There may be warnings of bad things, and consequence to poor actions, but there is also promise and hope. There are words of justice and a better future.

I find myself again being pulled to these words of exile and hope.

Scripture is full of stories of dislocation and disbursement. It starts from the very beginning, from the origin stories when Adam and Eve are expelled from the beautiful and perfect garden. It continues when Cain is driven out after he kills his brother Abel. Later the people of the world are dispersed after they build a tower to try and reach the heavens at Babel.

The theme of exile and disbursement continue with the ancestors of the faith.

- Abraham and Sarah are sent away to an unknown land
- Hagar and Ishmael are sent away after Sarah grows jealous
- Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers
- The people of Israel are taken captive by Egypt

- After the people of Israel are restored in the land, and the temple is built, they are conquered and exiled to far off lands

Even in the New Testament, we see a people dispersed... the new church that is formed is not contained in one place, it is scattered throughout the world.

If scripture is about a people in exile, a people dispersed, it is also a chronicle of God's continued faithfulness in the face of a faithless people.

- God sends Adam and Eve out, but not before giving them clothes to wear
- Cain is driven away, but not before a mark of protection is put upon him
- Abraham and Sarah are sent to an unknown place, but they are also the beginning of a great people that is chosen to be a blessing for the whole world
- God hears the cries of the child Ishmael and comes to his rescue
- Joseph comes to prominence and is able to save his family and many people
- The people of Israel are delivered from Egypt in the Exodus
- God promises return to the people in exile
- For the upstart church of the New Testament – they are given the Holy Spirit – and their mission is now to be dispersed...

There is this tension in scripture, between exile and God's promises. Between the people's faithlessness and God's faithfulness.

The prophet Isaiah lays out this tension well. For the first 39 chapters, Isaiah has been calling the people of Israel to account. The people have rebelled. God is angry about how the people have broken covenant, treated their neighbors badly, Jerusalem has been taken captive by

Babylon, and some of the people have been exiled. And it's not just that Jerusalem messed up once, but 39 chapters of rebellion, decades and decades of defiance of God.

The sin, the problem, isn't just about individuals, it is communal. It is systemic. The whole nation is flawed. Jerusalem is a repeat offender.

Isaiah was a voice that the people of Israel often did not want to hear. For dozens of chapters Isaiah has warned the people about their actions and the path of destruction to which it would lead. He had warned them time and time again that they were not following in the ways of God, and yet, they did not heed his warnings. The Jerusalem prophets, Isaiah among them, made it unmistakably clear that the destruction of the city and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength; rather, they were a well-deserved punishment from God.

But beginning at chapter 40, verse 1, the entire book shifts. Instead of judgment, in verse 2 God directs the heavenly council to "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term." God declares mercy for a people who merited punishment. Gone is the deserved condemnation. Instead of punishment and anger, God speaks to the members of the heavenly council saying, "Comfort, O comfort my people."

God then commands two more things, that a road be made in the wilderness for God to appear so that the glory of the Lord can be revealed, and that we should cry out. What I find extremely interesting in this passage, is that when the voice of God commands the prophet to cry out, the prophet does not seem so willing to cry out the good news.

Instead, the prophet says this. "All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field." The prophet is pushing back at God- why should I cry out to these people who are like grass? Why should I cry out

to these people who wither and fade? Why bother proclaiming good news to these unrepentant people? It's a logical question, really: why cry out to a people unwilling to hear?

But, God knows, there are people who need to hear this cry. Those who are hungry, cast down, trampled upon, jailed, forsaken, and lost. There are days, long days, when our work feels futile. When we doubt the words that the arc of the moral universe will bend toward justice...

There are days, long days, when it feels like our exile from that hopeful vision of the kingdom of God will never end. There are days when we, the people are like grass, when our cry in the wilderness is met with complete silence, when we sit alone in our grief.

If we stand humbly in the tradition of the prophets, we cry out not because the people are ready to hear it. We cry out because God has given a Word of redemption and reconciliation.

And so, we proclaim and act even when it feels futile. We proclaim the radical love of God in Christ Jesus available to all. We cry out for a contrite and reconciled nation when people are judged not by the color of their skin, or by their gender identity, or economic situation, but as a beloved child of God. We prophesy that #BlackLivesMatter even though it is not yet fully true. We declare that love is love is love, even when there are still those persecuted for who they love. We desire justice to roll down like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream even as it is our tears that seem never-ending, and our throats are parched and dry from the shouting for God's kingdom to come.

We plead with God to tear open the heavens and come down.

Isaiah understands that this journey must travel through a wilderness, for there are times when it seems that a dry desert separates us from a loving

God. And thus, the call to make a way in the wilderness, to make a highway for God.

We are to make a way into the wilderness, we are to be the forbearers to the glory of Jesus. We hear in the words of Isaiah to the people of Israel, “your time of trouble is coming to an end.” There will always be reasons to despair, but this is also the world into which the Christ has entered, and therefore peace, hope, and comfort are born. But we also have a role to play, because we pave the way for God to come into the world. We can also get busy building the road through the wilderness in which hope, peace, joy, and love enter the world.

Noted theologian John Dominic Crossan has said, “You have been waiting for God, while God has been waiting for you. No wonder nothing is happening. You want God’s intervention, he said, while God wants your collaboration. God’s kingdom is here, but only insofar as you accept it, enter it, live it, and thereby establish it.”

Isaiah says to prepare a way in the wilderness. It is significant that he did not say, “Gather provisions in Babylon, sell what you cannot carry in Damascus and buy food and water and camels.” The starting point is hard labor in the wilderness. Friends we are still in the wilderness for a little while longer, and the work is hard.

There is a story by the late pastor and author William Boggs about he and his family driving on a hot Carolina afternoon when he passed an orchard of “U-Pick” peaches. He writes, “I doubt any bargain would be sufficiently attractive enough to lure me out of my air-conditioned car into a steamy afternoon to pick fruit, but we pulled over, paid our money and selected a bushel basket to fill with fresh, ripe South Carolina peaches.”

“As we set off into the orchard, an old fellow, as wrinkled as a peach pit who was tending the place said, ‘If you want the best fruit, go deeper into the orchard; the peaches on the fringes are picked over, but deeper in, you'll find the best fruit.’ So, we walked away and figured we had gone far enough. We set the basket down, but the old man hollered, ‘Go deeper.’

“So, we picked up the basket and went a little farther and then when we started to pick, the man said again, ‘No, go even deeper... the best fruit's farther in.’ Once more, Boggs and his family picked up their basket and walked a little further, thinking they were surely deep enough and as they finally felt like they had gone as far as they could, the old man hollered once more, ‘Go on. Go deeper.’” And then he writes, “And so we did, right into the midst of the orchard, and we found the old man was right, the finest, plumpest peaches were untouched and waiting for us.”

If you want to know the full extent of God’s love, be honest, go deeper, deeper still. We will need to do the hard work to bear good and beautiful fruit. It is hard work to build the highway of righteousness and grace so that God can show up.

I don’t know about you, but lately I know I have uttered the words, “What next?” Waiting for another shoe to drop. I know I’m not alone. How many of you have been asking that? What next?

What awful violence is going to happen next? What kind of shooting is going to happen next? What act of terrorism is going to happen next? What act of bigotry and hate is going to happen next? In this 24-hour news cycle world it is hard not to ask that question. What next?

Isaiah is telling us not to ask, “What next?” Instead ask, “How is God going to show up next?”

Instead of asking, “What next?” ask, “What will God do next? Where do you see God at work?”

Instead of “What next?” ask, “What am I going to do next? How am I preparing to make God’s path straight? How am I offering comfort?”

Isaiah ends this chapter in this way (and I mentioned these words last week).

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He 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.” (Isaiah 40:38–41)

We desperately need the promise of this passage, for God to give us the strength and courage to rise above the evils of this world, to run with joy and never lose hope. In this time of ours we need the hope and power of God.

May we be willing to go deeper

May we not grow tired.

May we shout for peace

May we work for justice

May we provide comfort to the weary.

May we make the way clear

May we bear good fruit

May we believe and trust God is with us...always...