

“Return from Exile”

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Isaiah 40:1-11

¹ 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;
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.

Prayer.

I don't mean to speak insensitively,
but we don't know suffering.
Our relative affluence
shelters us behind
supermarkets with stuffed shelves
doctors that answer to every little ache or
pain

automobiles covered by Triple-A¹
insurance policies for every possible
malaise.

If suffering could be quantified
measured or compared
where would you place our existence
when measured against

¹ The American Automobile Association, or AAA.

... the African orphan in Darfur,
whose village of adults has died of AIDS,
and this moment covers when rebels
appear
brandishing machetes and employing rape?
... the suicide bomber,
who happens to be
a teenage girl raised in a refuge camp
impoverished and hungry all her life
using animal waste as firewood to keep
warm?

How would we quantify suffering against
... the millions of families living in earthquake
rubble
a fraction of which have received a tent
or blankets
to endure another Himalayan winter?
... the millions of North Korean families
resorting to tree bark
to satisfy hungry bellies
and no fuel oil to heat their stoves?
... (or closer to home) the working,
displaced, poor
blue collar homeowners in New Orleans,
returning to find everything destroyed
smashed and covered in mold
and their mortgage payments now coming
due?

Money can't buy happiness
but it can certainly make life a whole lot
easier.
Money doesn't exempt anyone from
a terminal diagnosis
but it certainly can set in motion
mountains of resources.
Money fails to give eternal life
but it can shelter us from the pain
of everyday living.
It can
even take the edge off of dying.
In the grand scheme of God's universe
we are a privileged people

blessed with prosperity, justice and peace.

At most we may have
a few rough places.
We hardly have any valleys too deep to
traverse.
Rarely do we confront the mountain that
completely
obstructs progress.
But mountains and valleys exist in this world
right along side our rough places.
It is only by the grace of God
that the suffering of mountains and valleys
are not a part of our experience.

Isaiah's voice
spoke to people living 40 years in the valley.
It spoke to our fore mothers and forefathers
isolated by impassible mountains
vanquished victims of war and imprisonment
squirring beneath the iron clad boot
of soldiers, guards and POW camps
by the waters of Babylon.
Isaiah's voice rang
promise and assurance
comfort and tenderness
to our ancestors who suffered
and this is what he said:
"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."
(v.4-5)

The voice of John the Baptist
rang 500 years later.
Conditions had improved,
but the people continued to churn
in the face of mountains and valleys
like a struggling man sinking in quicksand.

The soldiers were the same
only their uniforms had changed.
Organize religion was in bed with the
oppressor
acting like an unfaithful mistress
behaving more like organized crime
than God's means of grace.
The voice of John the Baptist
rang out loud and clear:
"prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our
God." (v.3)

John's voice rang
promise and assurance
comfort and tenderness
- for a child was coming
that child would be know as Jesus
and the glory of the Lord would be revealed.

Today, the Church picks up the common
thread
that has woven its way
from Isaiah and John,
calling upon the memory
and the spiritual presence of Jesus,
to whet our thirst
to give voice to our yearning
to circulate life into the promise
that Jesus Christ is coming again!

Jesus is coming.
He is coming with a terrible, swift sword
to judge the quick and the dead.
He is coming to kick in the door of injustice
bring down the tin horn bullies from their
mountains
ushering in the final epic of peace.
He will fill the valleys of broken dreams
and establish His kingdom
on earth just as it is in Heaven.
Sin will be forgiven and forgotten
fading from memory
passing like thin air

forever from His kingdom.
Pain will be replaced
by the balm of Gilead.
Suffering will be vanquished.
Tears shall be no more.

The suffering, orphaned child from Darfur
and the refuge suicide bomber with nothing
to loose -
listen up!
The cold and shivering earthquake or
tsunami survivor
the hungry and the relocated -
listen up!
Hey,
all you with a few rough places in your life -
listen up!

The day is coming, Advent proclaims!
The day is coming, Advent proclaims!
"Get you up to a high (place),
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!' "(v.9)
He is coming to save you!

Glory be to God! Amen.