

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11

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 his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I was the kid at sleep-away camp that was homesick within a few hours.

I loved my first summer of camping but something changed between the first and second summer and that week-long adventure at Camp "Everwood" we'll call it is one that I still remember distinctly because of how much I hated it:

- The sleeping bag on the wooden bunk in the dark cabin was not my bed, in my room, in my house.
- The food wasn't good and this camp had a practice of dumping all of the wasted food on everyone's plate into a common tub in the center of each table. The table with the most food waste "lost." *What we lost*, I'm not sure but I do remember the terror of not being able to

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finish what was on my plate with a nervous stomach therefore being the reason my table “lost.”

- Speaking of lost the traditions were lost on me; I didn’t understand any of them neither their point nor their value.

- One of them was the “polar gator” swim, where, very early in the morning, just as the sun was beginning to rise, a marching band would come blaring into the cabin as we campers slept, and we had to quickly put on bathing suits, march down to the lake and jump into the frigid water. (This was in Michigan so the water was always cold.)

My husband has suggested more than once that this camping experience as I describe it especially for a ten-year-old was neither good nor appropriate so it doesn’t matter if some thought it was fun. The whole thing should have been shut down.

But what I remember most and I imagine this is true for the exceedingly homesick kids whether you’re at a good camp or a not so good camp is the utter lack of control; of powerlessness. I remember standing on the playground, staring into the distance at the measly fence that marked the camp property, and wondering if I could make a run for it when no one was looking. Could I make it to the gas station that we stopped at before finding the camp? *How far away was that?* There I could ask for the phone which I wasn’t allowed to use at camp and call my parents and get out of this terrible place.

Well, I never made a run for it, but I did send a lot of letters home that began with the words made of giant, capital letters: *Please rescue me!*

I share this story because it is always the first one that comes to me when I reach for experiences that could give me any small fraction of an understanding of exile.

And I know...summer camp...when I was ten. It’s a limited perspective.

But in her commentary on this passage, Rev. Cynthia Jarvis contends that Isaiah’s word of comfort is only heard by exiles who know they are exiles.

The sheer relief is only experienced by those who can name their captivity.

As we gather on this Second Sunday of Advent the day we light the candle for peace we may be more aware than usual of those things that hold us captive.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I recall hearing the observation that this would be a communal experience that forever changed how we read and heard biblical texts about exile. And now 8 months into it, it’s clear that for many, this is probably true.

I was in a meeting just this past week where the typical “check-in” became a tour of COVID-19 and the grip it had even on our little group touching those we love and affecting virtually every part of our lives.

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The prophet described the exile of the people as wilderness territory

Leaving it to our imaginations to describe all that wilderness implies: the feeling of being untethered, the loss of security, the pain of separation, the loss of identity, the need to be vigilant—always on the defensive.

Though we ought to be awfully careful in claiming too much similarity, the wilderness is an experience we do understand with an added depth this season.

Today, as we meet via the screen in a season where we especially crave closeness, it might look like longing. It looks like longing for a return to normal at least the normal that meant connection, freedom of movement, ease of communication.

Today, as we suffer from worry for ourselves and our high-risk people and the anticipatory grief that comes with it, it might look like anger directed at those who aren't doing their part to choke the virus anger at those we blame for the exile.

Today, as we hold our breath wondering if our places of work or learning or leisure are about to shut down again it might look like an exacerbation of the longing, the anger, the sense of insecurity, and isolation.

And today, as we meet these old and familiar words from Isaiah, it might look like hope. In the middle of the wilderness, it is difficult if not impossible to stop the reel of negative images from playing in your mind's eye, but the other images of life on the other side can bring a balance that saves your weary soul.

I once heard despair described as grief when there is no hope of tomorrow being any better.

And I don't know if the community Isaiah spoke to in chapter 40 had come to despair. But if they had the prophet met that despair with a promise and an image to go with it a moving image of life on the other side of their captivity. He announced it would not be the end of their story:
You have received double for all your sin. Comfort, comfort.

Assuming that the people are the audience for the coming instructions just as they are for these tender words, "comfort, comfort," there is a call in this poetry:
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God; prepare the way of the Lord.

A highway.

We often think of Advent as a time for slowing down, but in our context, a highway denotes speed, efficiency, the pursuit of a destination without a lot of lingering or detours.

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In Isaiah's time, it must have been similarly efficient. It is made straight by dramatic shifts in the landscape where everything becomes smooth the valleys are raised up and the hills and mountains brought down. There's no more taking a long way around.

This text with all of its solace also carries with it an urgency. The Lord is coming and we ought to hasten the Lord's arrival.

What does that look like today? How do we build a highway for God?

A favorite book my house right now is one called "It takes many kinds of trucks to build a road," and with lots of pictures that make my toddler's heart sing the book describes the process of building a big road all the different trucks that are involved each with their own specialty. For the past two weeks, we have read this book minimally five times a day and I have learned a lot about building a road. And a lot about trucks.

And because the addressee of these instructions is a community I imagine the building of that highway is a community affair, and what I do to build that road is going to look different from what you do. We have to discern for ourselves what we are called to do this Advent, how we are called to hasten the Lord's coming.

I'm also struck by the imagery of leveling the land. It indicates that preparing the way has just as much to do with removing obstacles as with making additions. The answer isn't always to take on something new.

Popular writer and researcher Brene Brown interviewed Sonya Renee Taylor a few months ago on her podcast "Unlocking Us," and in that interview, Taylor described her image of human beings as something like acorns. All acorns begin with the same potential to grow into an oak tree. "Natural intelligence intends that every living thing become the highest form of itself and designs us accordingly." And the only difference between the acorns that remain acorns and the acorns that become trees is the environment. Some environments are conducive to growth; others are not. Growth depends in large part on removing those obstructions that impede growth.

God's growth certainly isn't as dependent on the environment as we are but the text suggests that we have an active role to play. Our Advent waiting doesn't mean sitting around idly but making the way. And making the way means making room. What would impede your capacity for receiving the unfathomable news of Christ's incarnation this year? What obstructions are in the way of hearing and receiving that news and risking being changed by it?

The news that we prepare to receive the news that Isaiah gives us a preview of on this day of Advent Peace is news that would have landed solidly with the traumatized Hebrew people.

All people are grass, the prophet says. They wither and fade.

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It's a word that honors their experience. It names it and doesn't try to explain it away. For people who had experienced all that the Hebrew people had during captivity no good word would have been heard that didn't have its basis in reality.

The people are grass...

And...the word of our God will stand forever. Here is your God.

Tyler Mayfield is a professor of the Hebrew scriptures at Louisville Theological Seminary, and in his new book on Isaiah, he translates the phrase "will stand forever" as "arises and grows forever."

The word of our God *arises and grows forever.*

Standing strong through the strong winds that blow where they will be true, but the word of God is more dynamic than it. It moves. It grows. It evolves.

At the time of Isaiah's writing, the eternal word of our God had not yet become flesh in the person of Jesus. But it would and it's the truth we prepare to receive anew at Christmas: *Here is your God. Right here.*

How do we build the highway, in this year of years, that will hasten the arrival of that news?

Here is your God! He will feed, and gather, and carry us. He will gently lead the mother sheep.

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