

Comfort, comfort my people

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Advent 2 Isaiah 40

Whenever I hear today's passage from Isaiah I almost immediately hear Handel's Messiah. In my ear is the clear tenor voice singing Comfort ye. Then comes the chorale "And the Glory of the Lord" The aria and the chorale are taken directly from this passage of Isaiah. You may not know this but the libretto, the words for the Messiah was written not by Handel, but by an Anglican scholar. A great deal of the text of this masterwork is from Isaiah. So what is so special about Isaiah? The answer to that tells us also why we rely on Isaiah so heavily for Advent.

Isaiah is probably written by three different prophets around the time of the Babylonian conquest, during the exile and lastly for the return after Cyrus the Persian conquers Babylon and restores Jerusalem. This covers a total of around 150 years of Jewish history. Understanding what was going on at this time is important to understanding not just today's passage but all of Isaiah and the role these passages play in our gospels including today's passage from Mark about John the Baptist.

Babylon has conquered, no not just conquered but crushed Israel. Solomon's temple the house where they believed God came and spoke to his people has been totally destroyed, the walls of Jerusalem have been pulled down. Life has not looked this bleak since the days of Egypt. All of the leaders and many of the people have been taken back to Babylon where they now live and work.

In past years I have used the Star Trek example of the Borg collective, which ran through the galaxy conquering and assimilating all in their path. However in reading a commentary I just purchased the author equated what had happened to Israel to what happened to the Native Americans during the 1800s. Think in terms of the famous Trail of Tears where entire tribes were uprooted from the ancestral lands and sent out into the west to reservations. Schools were set up to save them from their ancestral beliefs and impose Christianity on them to save the pagan souls. This is what Babylon did to Israel.

Now there was a belief at the time some 2500 plus years ago that each land had their own god or gods. The Babylonian's head god was not Yahweh, but Marduk and he ruled this part of earth. So some of the Jews truly wondered if not only had they been defeated but if Yahweh had any power in Babylon to protect them.

That is the setting at the end of first Isaiah and now second Isaiah begins his writing in chapter 40 with the famous passage we have this morning. Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says your God. Isaiah is proclaiming that even though

things are bad the God of Israel is still God and still in command. Now he says that is time to prepare a way in the wilderness for God to come. This is the beginning of redemption for the nation.

So now fast forward 500 some years to the first century in Jerusalem to our passage from Mark. While this is the start of Mark we must remember when Mark was written. Look at the parallels. Mark is probably written in the 70s. Rome has crushed the recent rebellion of the zealots and Jerusalem has been destroyed. Herod's temple is gone the temple mount flattened and the diaspora has begun. Jerusalem as a city really doesn't exist. Is it any wonder that Mark in proclaiming Jesus as the messiah turns back to second Isaiah for words of hope and the show that once again God is intervening to rescue his people?

Isaiah says to go up on a mountain and proclaim the coming of the Lord and John is just that voice crying in the wilderness in a different time, but in the same place! Now I doubt Isaiah actually was writing about Jesus. In fact the savior that came in Isaiah's time was actually Cyrus the Persian who during the time of third Isaiah conquers Babylon and allows the people of Israel to return to Jerusalem with all the temple goods and support to rebuild the city and the temple.

However the gospel writers look back and say, see God has done this before and God is going to do this again. In fact our great hope is in the steady presence of God. Isaiah says that we are like grass, just a brief blip in the vast timeline of God's world, but God and God's word stands forever. This was good news in the time of the Babylonian captivity, good news in the time of Jesus and is certainly good news in today's world.

Those who sit in darkness have seen a great light was true then and it is true now, but only if we have the courage and the faith to open our eyes and see the light. And not only do we need to see the light we need to spread the light in the darkness that is our current world. We hear in scripture that the darkness cannot overcome the light and that is true.

So what are the hills, the valleys, the rough places that are keeping you from proclaiming the good news both for you and for God's people? That really is the question.

Among other things we can all act like Christians, like we actually believe and want to live the kind of life Jesus calls us to live. We have too many people today who worship Jesus, but do not follow him, do not live by his teachings. Too many people who pay lip service to the gospel message, but when it comes to how they live their lives it is not in accordance with the teachings of the Prince of Peace. I've seen several variations of the post, "If you want to keep Christ in Christmas then feed the hungry, clothe the poor, welcome the stranger, love your enemies." I cannot tell you how to do this other than to point to the gospels and the teachings of Jesus.

The Men's Spirituality group has been reading *Breathing Underwater* by Richard Rohr. This is a book that looks at the 12 steps of AA as a model for living whether you have an alcohol problem or not. One of the steps calls for you to look at what you have done and not done in the course of each day. One way to do that is to take time each night and look back at the day. The Jesuits call this an examen¹ and if you want to see the exact exercise I'll be happy to share it with you. However you might just take today's passage from Isaiah and use it as a way to reflect on how have a preached the gospel in my life today.

I came across a prayer this week in one of the many daily meditations I get. This one is from Pastor Steve and I posted it on the St. Aidan's Facebook page and I want to close with this prayer that serves the purpose of a reflection on the day and a prayer of preparation for the next.

God, prepare your Way in me.

What valleys in me need to be lifted up?
Raise those low places.

What mountains in me need to be brought low?
Dismantle those mighty things.

What rough places in me need to be made smooth?
Smooth them out.

How might your glory be revealed in me?
Let it shine.²

¹ <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen>

² <https://www.unfoldinglight.net/reflections/j5xgrephitygm8w3lnjx8a2da7ee3c>