



Opened to God's Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11 & Mark 1:1-8

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **2** As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; **3** the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," "

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And 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. **6** Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. **7** He 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. **8** I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mk 1:1-8 NRSV)

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. (Is. 40:1-11 NRSV)

1

If you were reading along in the book of Isaiah and came to Chapter 40, you would know at a glance that something has changed.¹ As Chapter 39 draws to a close the prophet Isaiah is foretelling the demise of Jerusalem. One verse later we find God telling the prophet to announce glad tidings to Israel.

Don't bother looking to see if some pages fell out of your Bible. One day we may find there are missing pages.² But for a very long time now the narrative has moved without the slightest explanation from news of a very menacing cloud hovering over Israel directly into the sunshine of glad tidings of great joy.

1

There are no “notes to reader,” no “sidebar” telling us there has been a long pause...a very long pause that turns out to be nearly 160 years.³ During that time many things happened – including Babylonian armies laying waste to Jerusalem, the Davidic dynasty being broken, and the temple being destroyed. The people of Israel were scattered far and wide...the brightest and strongest being led in chains to Babylon where they spent 50 years as slaves. It was of this 50-year time of Exile and heavy servitude the psalmist wrote, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion (i.e., Jerusalem)...”⁴

They wept because of what they had lost – pride, homeland, and the temple. They wept because they were afraid their misfortune was punishment for ignoring God. They had strayed from their faith and so deserved what befell them.

We all know what it feels like when everything has gone wrong. I’ve spoken with people often enough who have fallen on hard times. In order to make sense of their misfortune they conclude they misbehaved in some way and believe their misbehavior was grievous enough to make God forsake them.

Israel’s grief was made more bitter because they were afraid that finally God was done with them. Sort of like a batter in baseball – three strikes and you are out. God had given them more than enough opportunities – far more than three strikes...more like 70x7 strikes. Each sunset the slate was clean...each day they ignored the things of God and failed to tend their faith. Did their Exile mean God had finally had enough of their arrogance and faithlessness?

Or was there even a more troubling possibility? Since the Babylonians conquered Israel, did that mean the Babylonian gods were more powerful than the God of Israel? Did their Exile mean God had been defeated and destroyed? That would have been a heavy burden for those enslaved Israelites to carry for 50 years.

2

Then one day...a day indistinguishable in its bleakness from the day, year, and decade before...something changed. The prophet we call Isaiah opened his mouth in Babylon and spoke what he took to be a word from the God they never expected to hear from again.⁵ “Comfort, comfort ye my people, says your God.”

As I thought about what that sort of announcement may have sounded like to Israelites who had been exiles for over 50 years, I thought about Javada – one of the Bosnian refugees this church sponsored in the late 1990s. She came to us as a widow. Her husband had been killed in the Bosnian conflict. She came to us worn, battered, and weary.

A man named Armin, who protected her in the refugee camp, came with her...and in time I presided over their marriage. They had been married only a short time when Javada received a letter from her dead husband. He was alive and well...and was on his way to be reunited with her. Now that was an announcement.⁶

Isaiah’s announcement was more surprising. Through the prophet, God said to the people of Israel who had not heard a word from God for over 50 years – “Comfort, comfort ye my people.”⁷

Three questions come to my mind. **First**, how did they know this word was from God? 50 years is a long time. What led them to trust it was a word from God?

Did God place an innate ability within us all that allows us to distinguish God's word from other words? Maybe Isaiah's message of comfort awakened that ability, setting off a kind of homing device.⁸ Perhaps that is how it worked: The words Isaiah spoke awakened new life in those Israelites by pointing them back toward God.

Or maybe something else was at work, too. Maybe those Israelites heard enough about the ways of God from parents and grandparents that when they heard Isaiah's words they knew this was the sort of thing God might say. Maybe they remembered the prophet's message that God would search for them even in Babylon far from Jerusalem.⁹ Maybe those Exiled Israelites were paying attention during times of "religious instruction" and so were able to listen for and detect the voice of God in Isaiah's words of comfort?

The **second** question raised for me by Isaiah's message has to do with understanding what the comfort was about. In my experience comfort is tailor-made to fit a particular situation. If my children cried out in the night, I went to their beds and held them as a way to let them know it was only a bad dream. I was near and would stay with them until they fell back to sleep. They knew they needed the comfort Deb or I could provide.

For what did the people of Israel need comfort? And did they know they needed it? I said earlier that life for the Jews in Babylon was grim...and it was. But a case can be made that it was no grimmer than life had been for their parents when they were living in the "freedom" of Judah.¹⁰

The Jews were in Babylon against their will, no doubt about that...but many had made a home there. It was the "fertile crescent," after all - the alleged site of the "Garden of Eden."¹¹ They were not their own masters...but then the common person in Babylon was a common person in Jerusalem. What sense did God's comfort most of the Jewish population?

According to the text, God went on to tell the prophet, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." Speak *tenderly*. The Hebrew literally says, "speak to her heart"...which is the language of wooing, of engagement, of the tenderness and grace of gentle human love.¹²

Do you suppose God's hot pursuit, God's tender love talk, stirred their hearts?

The **third** question God's comforting word raises for me has to do with us - with whether or not we can identify with God's gift of comfort.

You and I may have had hard times here and there. We may have known our share of sorrow. We may be inconvenienced or even fairly hard-hit by the down-turn in the economy. But few of us have missed many meals. Nor have we been slaves. Slavery was all the Israelites had known for over 50 years. Day in and day out...cruel servitude. Their lives had no inherent value. They had no inalienable rights.

When Isaiah spoke his words of comfort, were the Israelites capable of responding? Were they capable of being excited?

To help us get a feel for what their experience may have been like, consider the experience of Viktor Frankl, a Jew who survived Auschwitz. Frankl tells of what it was like to finally be liberated from the horror of a Nazi extermination camp. He writes...

"On the day the white flag was hoisted above the camp gates of Auschwitz...it would be wrong to think we went mad with joy. With tired steps we prisoners dragged ourselves to the camp gates. Timidly we looked around and glanced at each other questioningly. Then we ventured a few steps out of camp... We walked slowly along the road leading from the camp... 'Freedom' we repeated to ourselves, and yet we could not grasp it... Things we saw created the first spark of joy...but it remained only a spark. We did not yet belong to this world.¹³

"That evening when we all met again in our hut, one said secretly to the other, 'Tell me, were you pleased today?' And the other replied, 'Truthfully, no!' We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to relearn it slowly.¹⁴

"We could not believe our freedom was true. How often through the years had our dreams deceived us! We dreamt the day of liberation had come, that we had been set free, had returned home, greeted our friends, embraced our wives, sat down at the table and started to tell of all the things we had gone through... And then...a whistle shrilled in our ears, the signal to get up, and our dreams of freedom came to an end. And now the dream had come true. But could we truly believe in it?"¹⁵

Was this experience as describe by Viktor Frankl anything like that of the Israelites? Whereas it took Frankl and his fellow prisoners a long time to understand and live into their freedom, the Israelite's literal freedom did not come for some time. The very thought that God still cared for them, though, lit a fire of hope within them that had gone out...a fire that could sustain them until actual freedom came.

6

John the Baptist stepped onto a world stage in which people were in desperate need of comfort...and set about getting them ready to receive God's "comfort and joy." Crowds made the long journey into the wilderness to hear him. They formed long lines on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John. He said he was preparing them for the greater one who was to come. He was lighting a fire of hope within them.

They did not much know how the Messiah would change them or their world. Nor, as it turned out, were many of them willing to be changed once he came.

But Jesus was God's merciful, comforting gift...God's way of giving us the courage to live as those who know what it means to be loved. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ From textual and historical research, scholars maintain "Isaiah" was written in three distinct eras. Isaiah 1-39 was written during the time of the actual prophet who was a citizen of Judah and prophesied during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah (783-742), Jotham (742-735), Ahaz (735-715), and Hezekiah (715-687). Isaiah 40-55 was likely written some

150-160 years later during the Babylonian Exile and is generally referred to as Deutero or 2nd Isaiah. Scholars suggest Isaiah 56-66 was written by a third author – and generally is referred to as Trito or 3rd Isaiah.

² The finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls (which began in 1947 in caves at Qumran, in the West Bank, about 13 miles east of Jerusalem) has revealed any number of missing verses to various books of the Bible. As of yet these missing verses have not been inserted into current Bibles except as footnotes. A day may come when these verses actually appear in the biblical texts.

³ Isaiah records events that took place around the year 700 BC. Babylonian armies invaded Jerusalem in 598 and then completely devastated the city in 587.

⁴ See Psalm 137:1.

⁵ From the *Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (1965), 822. We know the Isaiah of Isaiah 1-39 was probably the person, the prophet who lived between 742-687 BC in the Southern Kingdom known as Judah. This was a critical period in which the Northern Kingdom was annexed by the Assyrian empire while Judah lived uneasily in its shadow as a vassal. The Isaiah of Isaiah 40-55 (known as 2nd Isaiah) was clearly not the Isaiah of the chapters 1-39. This Isaiah lived in Babylon and spoke to his fellow Exiles. The year is around 539 BC. The Isaiah of Isaiah 56-66 (known as 3rd Isaiah) probably lived between 530-510 BC and speaks to life in the restored community.

⁶ Javada's joy was indescribable...but it was a complicated joy, as you might imagine. Before her first husband arrived (I cannot remember his name), her marriage to Armin was annulled and he was deported by the State Department back to Bosnia because he really was a very dangerous person. The reunion between Javada and her first husband was a blessing to witness.

⁷ Scholars suggest there is a gap of 150 years from the end of Isaiah 39 and the beginning of Isaiah 40. This takes into consideration the historical critical data wherein Isaiah spoke in the 8th century BC to Israel (i.e., the Northern Kingdom). When Isaiah 40 begins we are dealing with a time in the 6th century in Babylon. The gap is 150ish years. However, the time of the "Babylonian captivity" was roughly 50 years in length.

⁸ It seems this is roughly what 4th century the Celtic theologian Pelagius believed. I am convinced Augustine never quite understood what Pelagius meant. Augustine accused Pelagius of believing humans can save themselves. I do not read Pelagius this way. I understand him to have believed that God plants within each of us an ability to recognize God. When the Spirit works upon us that ability is awakened. This ability, however, never works independent of God's initiative. I don't see this as being much different from the orthodox belief that faith is our response to God...but our faithful response is only possible by God's initiative.

⁹ Heschel, Susannah. ed. 2011. *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 27.

¹⁰ They did not live with a "manifest destiny" mentality (a misleading myth) that lured them into thinking life would be better for each succeeding generation.

¹¹ The "fertile crescent" is a crescent-shaped region stretching from just south and west of modern-day Jerusalem then northward along the Mediterranean coast to present-day Syria and eastward through present-day Iraq then southward along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to the Persian Gulf.

¹² Wright, N. T. 1997. *For All God's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 44.

¹³ Frankl, Viktor E. 1963. *Man's Search for Meaning*. NY: Washington Square Press, 138-139.

¹⁴ Frankl, 140.

¹⁵ Frankl, 140.