

Crying Out: "Give Us Strength!"

December 6, 2020 AM
Advent series on Isaiah

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Beloved people of God at Trinity,

Are you tired of all the changes COVID-19 has brought into our lives? I am. I miss you all so much. I miss gathering for worship with people filling pews. I miss being able to visit with you. I haven't been in a hospital or nursing home for a long time, other than 3 times in the 8 months when someone was dying and I was permitted in—by exception. These are tough times. I sometimes feel my strength sapped and I have to pray, "Lord, give me strength!"

I'm sure you all feel the changes in your own way. Maybe that's especially true as Christmas approaches. Someone sent me a cute video clip about how even decorating has changed. Take a look. **VIDEO**

That expresses how we all feel about social distancing and everything related to COVID these days. Not even Christmas can be normal. Some people feel like shouting, "O, give me strength!"

Some people who study church trends are forecasting a huge change in how churches do things in the future. This pandemic time has made us all more comfortable with online, pajama worship. Some of the doom and gloom predictions for the church can leave one feeling depressed, if not scared, about the future. We cry out, "Give me strength, O God!"

Young people have been forced away from friends during this time of online learning. All your fun activities are cancelled. No sports, no choirs, not much of anything. You too can cry out, "Give me strength!"

There's no doubt that this is a difficult time for everyone. It's not the same at all but it might perhaps give us a little sample of what people were feeling who were the first to hear the words of Isaiah 40. As the Jewish audience to whom Isaiah speaks is addressed, God says, "Give them a message of comfort to strengthen them and help them as they face a period of struggle."

In Latin, the words meaning *with strength* come from the word *cum-fortis*. We get our English word *comfort* from that. This is what Isaiah is trying to get us to understand. Comfort isn't about going to the spa, crashing on the couch or even being rocked in your mother's arms as a baby. It's not about being comfortable or living without the struggles of COVID-19 or anything else. It's about finding strength for the challenges we face. Finding strength in the Lord leads to comfort!!

In our reading we hear four voices that each encourage God's people in their time of struggle. And maybe you and I need to listen to those voices ourselves and see what God might be saying to us in our situations today. How is God giving us comforting strength today, in this strange time in history?

The Voice of Pardon

First of all, there's a voice of pardon that is heard.

Boys and girls, do you like Dr. Seuss? He has written so many memorable, fun books for kids. I'm told his book *Oh, the Places You'll Go* is meant to be a kindergarten graduation book. Listen as it starts off:

Congratulations! Today is your day.

You're off to great places. You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself

Any direction you choose.

You're on your own.

And you know what you know.

And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go.

At one point it even says, "You're too smart to go down any not-so-good street."

But is it really our smarts that enables us to choose the good paths in life and to steer clear of any trouble in life?

The truth is that we all head down the not-so-good street sometimes. In fact, we go there quite naturally. I can think of many times in my life that I had enough smarts to know better, but I still chose the wrong pathway. I had good training, good role models to follow, I knew right from wrong but I still chose wrong. I don't think there's anyone listening who can say they've made the right choice every time in life. Too often it seems easier or even better in the moment to choose the not-so-good street. Only later do we regret it. In fact, sometimes it takes a life changing event or a worldwide catastrophe before we realize that we've made a wrong turn somewhere.

Such was the case for God's people in the Old Testament... and it seemed to happen over and over again too, just like it does for us so often. Here we are in Isaiah 40 which is a prophecy for Israel—more specifically for exiles from the tribe of Judah in Babylon. This chapter foretells a time when they will have been carried away from their homeland because of their disobedience.

Judah was judged repeatedly in the book of Isaiah for her idolatry, for following the ways of her world, worshiping wooden, ceramic, gold or silver statues as gods. Looking to these dumb idols for success in business or for fertility issues or whatever was their need or desire. They put their life in the hands of idols instead of the Lord God Almighty. Several years later they reap the fruit of their idolatry which leads them to exile.

There—from Babylon—they are singing in the words of the old Boney-M song, "By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, ye-ah, we wept, when we remembered Zion." That's a song about God's people in Babylon thinking back to their home—Jerusalem or Zion, the city of God. They are living far from God's temple and from their

own homes. They are NOT under control of their own lives. Now they are wailing. But it was their rebellion and sin that got them in Babylon.

Yet the grace of God comes to them. They hear the word of the Lord in Isaiah 40:1.

*Is 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

These words of grace from God are given to strengthen them in that situation.

I've told you before that there was a time in my late teens when I was praying for forgiveness for something. I had prayed about it many times before and continued to feel guilty about. I can't explain it exactly but, as I was praying, I felt a tap on the side of my head. Whether physically real or not, it packed a spiritual punch. It came with this voice in my head that said, "Stop praying about that! I forgave that a long time ago. Now just accept it. Believe it. And move on!" That was a faith strengthening moment of comfort that has continued to strengthen me for 40 years almost.

That's the comfort of the voice of pardon from the Lord. And if that's the voice you need to hear today in the pain and struggle of your life, take it to heart from God's word through Isaiah. Accept the Lord's gift of salvation. Jesus has come to pay for our sins—double, is the Bible's way of saying more than enough. Jesus is more than enough! Accept his pardoning comfort and let it strengthen you to live more fully for God.

The Voice of Providence

Next, there's a voice of providence.

The people of God might have gotten themselves into their Babylonian situation. But God isn't going to leave them there. He gives a word of encouragement that shows he's got everything under control. That's the voice of providence which we hear in this reading.

2020 will be a year none of us forgets. Everyone of us has had to adjust our lives and deal with our disappointment and all of the unwelcome changes. Maybe we've had to deal with anger, maybe even our pride or prejudice as we've worked our way through this pandemic. I know I've had cabin fever, feeling stuck in the office, unable to visit people, dealing with relaunch protocols and stuff that just sucks the life out of me. People are feeling crankier and crankier as we go through this long season. And maybe even more so as they think about spending Christmas alone. Hard to celebrate when you're by yourself. Hard to be excited when you know you can't have loved ones around you. You can possibly be upset with God for allowing all this stuff to happen. You can at

least be wondering what God is up to. What good could possibly come out of all this disruption?

For Isaiah hearers, exile meant 70 years away from home. 70 years! Seven Zero. That'll kind of put our COVID struggles into a bit of a different perspective, I would think. Nonetheless, it doesn't really matter how our struggles compare to anyone else's. When you are in a struggle, it usually feels big, if not overwhelming. So, listen to God's word to you and me as he gave it to his people about 2500 years ago, this voice of providence.

*Is 11:3 A voice of one calling:
"In the desert prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the wilderness
a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all mankind together will see it.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

This voice—we aren't told who exactly is speaking, but this voice—compares exile to a desert: It's an uninviting place; hot as blazes in the daytime and pretty cold at night; nothing really grows there; and there are unwelcome predators like the vipers who can do you great harm. The desert is the biblical location of evil. Isaiah's prophecy is that Judah will be delivered from the desert, she will return to Jerusalem at some point. It won't be easy, but God will make a way.

However, the desert is a preparing place, says this prophecy. Think of 40 years in the desert before Israel entered the Promised Land. Think of Jesus in the desert—40 days of preparation before he started his ministry. The deserts in our lives are not just something to be endured. God is at work in every situation we find ourselves. This is providence. God's care and control over everything. Get that straight in your head, friends. Whatever we go through is part of God's plan. Deserts, hard places, difficulties are places where God is present and working.

If you are fed up with this pandemic desert, I don't blame you. But we all need to ask ourselves, "Is there something God is trying to teach me, something he's laying on my heart, something he's doing to prepare me for a fuller life that Christ has redeemed me for?" This is what God does. This is his providence. He's always lovingly at work in our lives, even when we don't understand. But when we believe this and trust him, this providential voice gives us comfort that strengthens us for the journey, whatever it might be.

God led the exiles home after their time in Babylon was done. This was, however, only a foretaste of what God had in mind. The true fulfiller of this prophecy, John the Baptist, quotes this passage from Isaiah to point us to Jesus. Jesus fulfills these words as one who invades all the deserts, breaks down the mountains and flattens the rough

places since—in this passage—these are all pictures of life without God? This is what we make of life when we try to live it without God. In the fulness of time, Jesus is born. Jesus is Way to God—the highway wide and smooth. He’s the way to all the healing God provides for our broken lives. In Christ, the providence of God means that God does, in fact, turn all evil to our profit in his own wonderful and mysterious ways and time. Trouble doesn’t mean God has forsaken us. It means he’s working and, if we trust him with that, we’ll be strengthened for the journey as we rest in the comfort of his faithful work being done in us and through us and even all around us. That’s the voice of providence.

The Voice of Promise

The third voice we hear in this passage is the voice of promise. Here we find comfort in realizing how we cannot depend on the undependable. And we don’t have to! Instead, we can find strength to go on because we know that God and his promises are sure and dependable.

The third voice basically says that people are here today and gone tomorrow—like grass—so you can’t depend on people alone. We can trust the Word of God which stands forever. That means God’s promises are certain. God will do—without a doubt—what he says he’ll do. In fact, the promises of God are certain for us because Jesus became the Word of God in the flesh. That’s what we celebrate at Christmas. He’s what makes our faith certain.

Our lives are frail. I certainly hope and pray that this coronavirus will help our world see how weak and frail we all are. One microscopic virus—a germ—is paralyzing the world. Our scientists, our medical staff, our politicians, we ourselves cannot stop it from doing its thing as swiftly as we might like. We can do a lot, but it doesn’t change the fact that we are all going to die from something. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Death gets everyone of us sooner or later.

But God promises a messiah who overcomes death. Jesus takes on our human nature and overcomes its greatest frailty—death. Yes, He rises from the grave for us. And the promise continues to end of the age when Jesus returns.

*Is 40:8 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever.*

God’s promises stand forever and will be fulfilled completely because Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. He stands forever and we stand in him.

The Voice of Peace

And, finally, Isaiah tells us about a voice of peace that speaks.
*Is 40:9 You who bring good tidings to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
“Here is your God!”*

- 10 *See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.*
- 11 *He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.*

I have to tell you that I recently made a bunch of phone calls to our seniors at Emmanuel Home. Guess what my greatest takeaway from them was? Young people, I want you to really think about this because we can all learn from these precious folks. Tell someone next to you right now what you think I learned from all my phone calls to our seniors. If you're by yourself, just say it out loud! 😊 What do you think I heard most often from the residents at Emmanuel Home?

Gratitude. Thankfulness is the answer. My heart rejoiced. The residents are living with restrictions on their social life, probably tougher than the rest of us, but they aren't dwelling on what they don't have. In fact, many said, "We still have lots to be thankful for." Or "We have it so much better than other places in the world." Of course, we'd all rather not have to face the sad, harsh, lonely and frustrating realities of 2020 but our dear friends across the parking lot here at the church are accepting this time with peaceful hearts.

That impressed me so much! What this means is that these elderly saints are finding the peace of Christ in this turmoil. They accept the voice of peace from our Saviour Jesus. They are trusting Jesus as their shepherd—the one who gently carries us all. They know his peace and have their strength to endure from the Lord! That's so comforting. And that comfort shines out from them and gives them strength to carry on.

We all need this peace and Jesus has come to provide it to us. A peace that passes all understanding. We don't earn it. It's his gift to us and it makes all the difference to how we face the struggles of life. May we all know the voice of peace and proclaim it. Proclaim Jesus as the Prince of Peace for us and all who put their trust in him.

Friends, I don't know which voice from the Lord you need to hear most in Isaiah 40. Pardon, Providence, Promise or Peace. Maybe a few more than others. Maybe all of them. We all need to believe these great gifts that come to us in Jesus, our Messiah. He's the one who delivers us from the Babylon of sin, the Babylon of uncertainty, the Babylon of human weakness and the Babylon of fear.

As we rest in his loving arms as our Good Shepherd, we find strength to go on. He is with us now and will be forever. That's our comfort. He is our comfort and strength. Praise his name! Amen.