

Isaiah: Comfort My People

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Prayer of Illumination

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Background

In our *Wayfair through the Word*, we now find ourselves in new and unfamiliar terrain. This isn't an easy portion of our journey. It's rigorous, but also so very rich. *The Prophets* are now our spiritual guides.

I like how Abraham Heschl put it in his classic work on the prophets saying that they're "some of the most disturbing people who ever lived." Think twice before inviting a prophet to your dinner party—because they'll talk about the things you're not supposed to talk about over the table: religion, sex, money, and politics.

To be a prophet is a lonely calling—because often the prophet needs to play the party pooper, saying what needs to be said. What no one else is willing to say. Prophets have a way of getting under our skin:

- *Patriots deem them disloyal.*
- *Pious consider them a threat.*
- *The powerful see them as seditious.*

A prophet doesn't have the luxury of being people pleaser. But one thing's for sure—prophets are passionate. Passionate about God and passionate about the world. Prophets long to bring a blurry world into divine focus.

The prophet's eye is upon society, his ear is directed to God, and his heart beats with the very heart of God.

The prophet's task, says Heschl, is to "make the invisible God, *audible*." Through the personality and voice of the prophet, the Word of God speaks to society and the individual. Other times the prophet is a visible parable—symbolically enacting God's message as a visual aid to rouse the slumbering and jar the callous. The prophets often either speak to God or think:

You want me to do what?!!! God?

- Isaiah walked around in public in his skivvies.
- Jeremiah buried his dirty underwear and had to dig it up again.
- Ezekiel cooked dinner with cow dung.

The point to all these disturbing actions was to let the people know that exile was looming and judgment was around the corner. The prophet doesn't so much seek to communicate great truths or generalities to ponder. No, the prophet speaks to concrete situations. And so the prophet's task is to whack us on the side of the head with a spiritual "two ba four." We need the prophets to knock some spiritual sense into us.

I'll be honest here—sometimes when I'm reading the prophets, I have a "pastoral" discussion with them.

- Relax! Take a chill pill! Breathe deep. Get some balance.
- Let's not be so negative here ... What about grace?
- Wouldn't it be better to have a message that brings us together rather than ruffling feathers or rocking the boat?

The prophet responds by shaking his head. No—this is what the Holy God has called me to speak.

The prophet doesn't put up with excuses, self-pity, or extenuating circumstances. This is about tough love. Taking ownership. And so the prophet isn't so much a peacemaker, but an agitator, a non-conformist, an iconoclast—making burgers out of sacred cows.

Like a pesky gnat or a buzzing fly, the prophets pester us about the:

- Neglect of orphans and widows,
- Corrupt judges,
- Unjust laws that favor the powerful and exploit the poor,
- Cutting corners in business,
- Showy and empty public worship,
- The worship of idols,
- And reliance upon the Military instead of the Maker.

The prophet steps on a lot of toes and makes a lot of enemies.

When you really slow down and listen to the prophets—you're going to be uncomfortable. Ill at ease. *And that's the point.*

The prophets are like eating broccoli or taking a spoon of cod liver oil. It may be tough going down, but it's good for the soul. They keep our faith honest and keep us from resting on our laurels. But we must not forget—the prophet not only afflicts the comfortable, he also comforts the afflicted.

This is the good news of the Prophets—they begin with doom, but they most assuredly end with deliverance. Hope is the last word. The prophets cast a vision of a future time when God's reign will bring peace, healing, and homecoming. But the thing is, to get to *restoration*, you first have to go through *demolition*.

So let's hear now from the Prophet Isaiah of the divine strength we can receive in our human weakness, from –

Scripture: Isaiah 40:27-31 (NRSV)

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Isaiah: Comfort My People

Does anyone here this morning have a birthday on the 29th of February? What year is that?

You're not only born in a special year, but you have a special name. People born on February 29th are called leaplings or leapers because of Leap Year. The fact that leaplings only get an official birthday every four years can present some interesting issues.

Motivational speaker Tony Robbins can rightfully claim that he published his first big seller at the tender age of six.

Rapper Ja Rule produced his first album when he was five.

The Gilbert and Sullivan classic opera, "The Pirates of Penzance," is comically based upon the problem leaper's face. The hero of "Penzance" is Fredrick, who was mistakenly apprenticed to "pirates" instead of "pilots." Still his indentured service was due to end up when he turned twenty-one. Unfortunately for Fredrick, he was a "leapling," and so while he was supposed to be freed in 1897, his "twenty-first" birthday, the pirates declare that he is bound to serve

them until 1940—the year in which he would celebrate his twenty-first “February 29th” birthday. At least his girlfriend Mabel was willing to “wait for him,” for another forty-three years!

Our passage this morning challenges us to not only wait upon the Lord, but to take a leap as well. A giant leap. Not of one day, one year, or four years. But 200 years. There’s a 200-year jump between Isaiah 39 and Isaiah 40. And this was a tough 200 years of exile for the people of Israel. Isaiah 39 predicts Israel’s exile to Babylon. Isaiah 40 jumps 200 years to the end of their Babylonian exile.

And so the book of Isaiah can roughly be divided into two parts: Isaiah 1-39 and Isaiah 40-66

- The first part deals with judgment, the second part focuses on hope.
- The first part braces for exile, the second part prepares for homecoming.
- The first part processes loss, the second part of Isaiah anticipates newness.

Or to put it in Christian terms, the 1st part is crucifixion, the 2nd part is resurrection. Isaiah wants to challenge us this morning to not only “mind the gap” but also take the leap, from Part 1 to Part 2.

To be spiritual leapers and leaplings, we need to step out from the affliction of Isaiah 39 and leap into the comfort of Isaiah 40 that God offers. In faith, to move from judgement to divine promise.

To get us from Isaiah 39 to Isaiah 40, the prophet asks us some questions:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the earth from end to end. In other words, the Holy God is Lord of Time and Lord of Space. God’s power is inexhaustible and limitless and accessible. God is a self-giving God, generous with the strength he provides. If you’re in exile right now, you’re a perfect candidate for an exodus. In your affliction, God hasn’t lost sight of you or overlooked you. Wait upon the Lord.

God isn’t a come and go God. He stays with us. And he’s a generous God. He doesn’t horde his inner reserves. God graciously shares them with us in our Isaiah 39 seasons of life to get us to our next chapter of life—the Isaiah 40 Life.

God’s promises and actions are for the present, not just the past. The Isaiah 40 Life is designed for those times that we’re spiritually, emotionally, or physically:

- deflated, depleted,
- dilapidated, discouraged,
- disoriented, or disappointed.

God is not like us. Unlike us, God doesn’t lose hair, teeth, energy, or his marbles with time.

God’s waistline or list of aches and pains don’t grow with time, like ours does.

God never grows faint or weary—*but we can.*

There are times where we feel either in body, mind, or soul like Bilbo Baggins describes it:

“... thin, sort of stretched, like butter that has been scraped over too much bread.”

Have you been there before?

But God gives us the power to do what we still need to do, while we have time on this earth. God refuels our empty spiritual tanks with hope and energy to keep moving forward, keep trusting, when we're at a standstill.

The good news according to Isaiah reminds us that God gives power to the powerless. The Lord refreshes the washed up and worn out. There's a time God says, "enough is enough!" What you need now is comfort. And this is where the Great Reversal, the Great Exchange kicks in.

Give God your exhaustion, and he will give you exhilaration.

Or as Paul later says, "When I am weak, he is strong."

To wait between 39 and 40 is to trust—with patience and hope. To wait upon the Lord is a confident expectation that things are going to turn out OK—*no matter what*.

[Erich Fromm](#), the German psychoanalyst and sociologist known for his book *The Art of Loving*, put it this way:

“To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime.”

Don't manufacture it yourself. Don't look to temporary fixes. Look to God.

As Isaiah says, "God works for those who wait for him."

With an Isaiah 40 faith, when we're feeling grounded—we trust *somehow, some way*, we'll mount up with wings like eagles. With an Isaiah 40 faith, even with blisters and bunions, we trust that we will run and not be weary, for those short bursts that we need to make. With an Isaiah 40 faith, we can walk and not grow faint in the daily grind. Along with Isaiah, we say to God, "Here I am, send me!"

Isaiah gives us hope in our waiting, because we know The Messiah, The Anointed One is coming for us. Isaiah shaped Christ's understanding of himself and our understanding of Christ. Isaiah is quoted 86x in the New Testament.

We're reminded of this on Christmas Eve, when we read from [Isaiah 9:6](#) –

A son has been born for us, a son has been given to us, and this is the name he has been given, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Jesus' mission statement during his time on earth was cut and paste from [Isaiah 61:1](#) –

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me and has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners.

Good Friday can be called good because of [Isaiah 53:5](#) –

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

The very name Isaiah means “the Lord saves” and so we have hope ... no matter where we find ourselves, God will come to the rescue.

Before there was Doctors Without Borders (est. 1971), there were Doctors Without Land.

In 1958 “Project Hope” was launched. “Project Hope:” was the vision of Dr. William B. Walsh, who had served as a physician aboard a destroyer in World War II.

As he witnessed first-hand the poor health conditions of children in the South Pacific rim, Walsh envisioned a “floating medical center” that could visit the residents of those islands. Amazingly, Walsh persuaded President Eisenhower to donate the retired naval hospital ship the USS Consolation to his cause. It was refurbished and re-named “SS Hope” (HOPE was an acronym for Health Opportunities for People Everywhere). In 1960, she set sail staffed with doctors, nurses, and technicians, devoted not just to offering health care to the residents of each place they made port, but to teach and train locals as new healers who would remain and continue to provide care.

For the next 14 years, the sight of the big grey ship emblazoned with the huge red letters SS HOPE truly lifted the hearts and gave hope to all who watched her arrival.

It is Christ who is our ultimate living, buoyant hope.

In the words of Isaiah,

Let those who go to sea set sail with praise in the air. Let those who live along the waters' edge sing His praise. Let them praise the One who is, was, and will be heard along the coasts.

Amen.

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