

## The Exile of Despair and Arrogance

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Advent 2

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*I propose to show that many of us these days live in an exile created by arrogance and walled in by despair. And in this time of Advent, we are called to confront the poverty of our exile and dare to leave ourselves open to being comforted by our God. So that those hearing this sermon will risk sitting in silence in the dark—stopping, longing, listening then hearing God’s word of comfort.*

May the God who Creates us...

Good Morning!

*“Comfort, Comfort my people.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
And cry to her,  
That she has served her term...”*

Isaiah 40:1-2a

Long before Handel, the words of one of the prophets of Isaiah resounded in the people’s ears and wrapped the souls of those in exile. These iconic words come to us from the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of the Prophet Isaiah. A book in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, that is presented as one piece, but is in all likelihood, written by at least three different people, over the course of some 200+ years. The author of the first 39 chapters of the book probably lived and wrote about the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, Before the Common Era, so about 742—701 BC. The Second Prophet, using the name Isaiah picks up in Chapters 40-55 and writes to a people living in exile who are being called to return home to Judah, to Jerusalem. The last chapters 56 to 66 were probably written by a different prophet, after the people had returned to Jerusalem and had begun the seriously hard work of rebuilding their city and their world. Just to give you a tiny bit of context allow me to do a quick history of the ancient Israelites.

Moses takes the Hebrew slaves out of bondage in Egypt to the land of promise in Cana. It turns out there are already people in the land of promise. There are wars and battles as the Israelites come into this land. The upside, downside and rightness and wrongness of these battles are a different sermon for another day. (A super relevant sermon, given the current war in Palestine.)

A United Kingdom evolves under King David around 1000 BCE. This Kingdom splits after his son Solomon leaves the throne. Now we have the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah around 900 to 850 BCE. The Kingdom of Israel is taken over by the Assyrian Empire around 720 BCE. The Kingdom of Judah, against God’s wishes, so say the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, makes an allegiance with Egypt and temporarily staves off destruction by

Assyria. But then, the Kingdom of Babylon comes to power and Egypt and Judah are overwhelmed. Keeping with the aforementioned prophets' predictions, the City of Jerusalem is sacked in 587 BCE by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The leaders of the community are thrown out of Jerusalem and placed in exile in Babylon for more than 150 years. The first prophet Isaiah, predicted the downfall of the people of Israel and Judah because of their corrupt societal practices and mistaken belief that political allegiances could save them from a sure and certain demise.

The soul stirring words we hear this morning: "Comfort, O Comfort my people says your God..." Are offered by the second prophet Isaiah to a tribe who have lived in exile and heard nary a word from their God in more than a century and a half. The people of Judah have been in exile, living in a foreign land. Existing in a world where it seems that God is mute, God is gone.

During this time, as the people of Judah try to create new lives in Babylon the Psalmist writes, "*How can we sing the Lord's song, in a foreign land?* (Psalm 137:4) How can we be people of prayer in a world of exile? They are bereft and many leave the faith.

Biblical Theologian Walter Brueggemann says that exile is constructed out of the twin daughters of arrogance and despair. He writes:

"Certainly the Babylonians, in their arrogance, construed a world without YHWH. Equally certain, the exiles in their despair construed a world without YHWH." (pp 20-21, *Isaiah 40-66: Westminster Bible Commentary*, 1998.)

The Babylonians seemingly had no need for God for they could take and make their own, whatever it was that they wanted. While the people of Judah, away from all they know, awash in sadness, absent hope, succumb to despair. And so both despair and arrogance shape and define the borders of exile.

I wonder if we too, might be something like those people five and half centuries before Christ, I wonder if we too might feel as if we are residing in exile? An exile bounded by despair on one side and arrogance on the other.

There is an evil arrogance in governments that launch terrorists or military attacks that accept or even plan on human beings as legitimate collateral damage. There is a viral arrogance in letting the ends justify the means. There is an insidious arrogance in ignoring facts to maintain power. This is an arrogance we now know well from these past few years.

There is also a free-floating sense of despair for many of us, as we find ourselves inhabiting a world that seems less safe, more conflicted, less connected, more insular, less embodied, and so much more virtual.

I sometimes feel as if I am existing in a wilderness, googling memes to express my feelings to the friends I do not know on the world of Facebook and Instagram. And when I have mornings like that, despair begins to seep into my soul. I suspect, I don't know for sure, but I suspect I'm not alone.

And then I hear these words:  
*Comfort, Comfort ye my people.*

What would that be like?  
 What would it be like to confront the despair and arrogance of this exilic time?  
 What would it be like to put our phones down?  
 And pick our souls up?

What is we dared to believe?  
 What is we opened ourselves up to God's call to return?  
 Enough my people enough.  
*She has served her term.*

What if all our doubts and uncertainties are naught?  
 What if our fears are not the pre-ordained supporting walls of tomorrow, but rather mere  
 soffits and facades, stymieing us from, embodying the hope of God's call?  
 What if we were to let go of the shelter of our despair?  
 The false power of our arrogance?

What if we stopped feeding our doubts and instead  
 And instead, willfully expose our naked, vulnerable selves  
 --to God's promise of more?

*God will feed the flock like a shepherd,  
 Gather the lambs in God's arms,  
 Carry them in his bosom,  
 And gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40:11*

What if in the remaining ever darkening days of Advent, we risked sitting in silence, waiting  
 for our God, instead of lamenting the days?  
 What is we set aside our fears and released our grip on despair and instead opened our  
 hands to receive God's love:  
 In our silent prayers, that may only be sighs.  
 In our carols and songs, that no doubt will be piped into our lives, what if we dared to  
 imagine more and prepare a place for God to be born in us again. To begin once more to  
 prepare in the wilderness of this world—A highway for our God—to prepare a way for us to  
 return again, once more to the Lord.

O comfort, O Comfort ye my people.

A voice cries out in the wilderness, Prepare the Way of the Lord.

Amen.