

In the Desert, a Highway for God

Isaiah 40:1-8

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Scrooge glanced about him on the floor, in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing.

“Jacob,” he said, imploringly. “Old Jacob Marley, tell me more. Speak comfort to me, Jacob!”

“I have none to give,” the Ghost replied. “It comes from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men.”

We all need comfort from time to time. When Isaiah 40 begins, Jerusalem has not had any comfort in a long time. Most scholars understand this to be the beginning of Isaiah 2, the sequel, which comes not in the period of warning that God’s judgment is coming and that the leaders will be taken away as prisoners to Babylon, but comes rather near the end of years of living in the capitol city of the evil empire. Most scholars give this prophet the name of Second Isaiah, but he gives no name to himself. In fact, he never appears as a character at all, unlike the original Isaiah. He is just a voice, just a messenger. But the word he is given by God is a word of comfort. The first Isaiah was ringing out a warning with the hammer of justice, reminding the nation that God despised religion without ethics and prophets supporting the status quo, but now in chapter 40 there is a sea change. Now this Isaiah is told to comfort the people.

Lord knows they needed comfort. The people of Jerusalem—who stand for all the people of Israel and Judah—had lost their nation. They no longer had a government. No temple. No flag. No army. Just imagine the US being in that situation after believing we were God’s favorites. They had lost their whole economy. They had essentially lost their religion, which was based on the temple and the monarchy. Jerusalem had lost its elite and its leaders, all carried away in chains.

It is into that spiritual desert that God speaks: “Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem; speak to her heart. Announce to her that she has served her term.” That’s a more appropriate translation than “her warfare is ended.” It means that Jerusalem deserved to be punished for her sins—not for individual sins primarily but for *national* sins, a concept it is hard for many of us to accept. The nation is punished because the nation sinned—by turning to idols, by mistreating the poor, by making religion serve the elite, and by making alliances with great powers with completely different values. The nation lost its soul and so God said that they would lose everything.

But now the sentence has been served. They have paid their debt to God. The message is that God is not going to punish them anymore. Scholars debate over what is meant by saying that Jerusalem has received *double* from God’s hand for her sins. You could read that to mean that they deserved to be spanked once but God spanked them twice, or that they deserved a sentence of 24 years in Babylon and God gave them 48. But it’s not likely that God is admitting here that he overdid it. One possibility is that the term translated “pay double” means “paid in full.” Another possibility is that this follows the pattern of several laws in Exodus in which a thief, for example, is required to pay back double the amount he stole—so the thief is not just giving back what he stole, but also paying a penalty.

There are really three forms of comfort in these few verses.

Comfort #1 is that your sin is forgiven. Your penalty has been paid. That is the good news that we call gospel, the gist of the Christian message which is a continuation of the message of the prophet. That is the news we still celebrate at this table: the body and blood of Jesus paid it all. All is forgiven. It is the comfort of God's amazing grace.

Comfort #2 is that God is coming. He is calling people to prepare the way for his coming, and when he arrives his glory will be revealed. God, who has seemed far away and invisible, will now be seen by all and he will reveal himself in decisive action. This is what Christians call hope, and what we mean when we say "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth." The word "advent" means "coming" in Latin, and we are in a season of preparing for God's coming.

Comfort #3 is that God's promise lasts forever. People are like grass, they come and go—but God does not die or fade away. People are fickle. You can't trust most people to do what they say they will do. If my trust in God depended on the faithfulness of the church, I would be an unbeliever. I think the NRSV gets it right when it translates "The people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." It is their *hesed*, their loyal covenant love that fades as quickly as a wildflower, but God's faithful love endures forever. God's promise will stand forever. That is our comfort.

As the word of comfort comes to us, we are standing in a place of destruction where everything we valued has been taken away from us. That is the desert in which the word cries out. What is clear to the prophet and to the people of Jerusalem is that they are in a desert that God himself created. The sense of emptiness around us is the consequence of our own choices which God deliberately allowed to play out. That was the penalty for our sin. God did not have to do a miracle to bring about our destruction; he just let history take its course. But God *will* have to do a miracle to restore us to life again. In Israel's historical situation, the prophet is talking about the miracle of Babylon falling to the Persians (that is, the Iranians) and the Iranian king establishing a policy of allowing conquered people to return to their homelands. The miracle that comes to us will be different, but it will also involve restoring life in a place that had become lifeless because of our own choices.

Just over two months ago, Becca and I took a trip to the desert, literally, in northern New Mexico and Arizona. It was like visiting a different planet with a different beauty. We loved it, but then we were staying in nice condos with running water and toilets and eating green chili to our stomachs' content. But if you were really having to live in the desert in ancient times, or in modern times with no resources, the desert is a harsh reality to face. I couldn't help thinking of that song by America that says, "I've been to the desert on a horse with no name."

After two days in the desert sun

My skin began to turn red

After three days in the desert fun

I was looking at a river bed

And the story that it told of a river that flowed

Made me sad to think it was dead [by Dewey Bunnell].

You may be living in a desert of grief. We have lost so many friends on the island this year. Kim Trusty told me she lost her sister this year, and four months later lost her mother. You may be living in a desert of depression which deepens as the holidays approach and the days seem shorter. You may be in a desert of lost faith, because God has not come through for you, thinking, as the people of Israel say later in Isaiah 40, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." And I think that this week we as a nation find ourselves in a desert place, a place of apparent hopelessness, because we don't see how justice is possible,

because we thought we had made more progress than that, but we seem to find ourselves back in the same hole we dug for ourselves when we accepted the fruits of slavery, and God is letting us have the consequences of our self-destructive choices as a people.

Psalms 62 begins with a cry, “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you, my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” It is in that desert that a voice cries: “Prepare the way for the Lord! In the desert, build a straight highway for our God.” It’s strange to me how the prophet imagines the building of a superhighway when none existed until the time of the Roman Empire. He describes things we take for granted if we drive down an interstate through hilly terrain: valleys filled in and mountains knocked down to make the highway as level as possible to accommodate the greatest possible speed.

A lot of interpreters get on the wrong track here because they already have in mind that Yahweh is going to return the people back to Israel. Therefore they read these words and imagine a superhighway through the desert to take the people home. But there is no mention here of Babylon or exile or return. No, who’s going to travel on this highway? It’s a highway for God. The important road for the prophet is not the one that takes us home but the road that brings God to us.

To cite another song from my youth, this is God saying through the prophet, “Get ready, ‘cause here I come! On my way. Get ready, ‘cause here I come!” [Smokey Robinson, recorded by Rare Earth]. When I come, my glory shall be revealed and all people—not just Israel, not just converts, but all people—shall see it together. That’s another of my favorite parts of the *Messiah*: the rousing chorus, “And the glory, the glory of the Lord, shall be revealed.”

That’s not only a word for one historical situation. That is the same thing that Jesus spoke of when he announced that God’s kingdom is coming and is already here. That’s what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel of John when he said that God’s glory would be revealed in him when he was lifted up—lifted up on a cross. I wonder if Second Isaiah understood that the coming of the Lord and his account of the Suffering Servant were the same thing. On one level, God did reveal his glory by rebuilding Jerusalem, but on a deeper level God revealed his glory by suffering for us on the cross.

Whatever desert we are in, God is coming to us in that desert and coming to reveal his glory. God is coming to comfort us, but if we are to be comforted we are required not only to mourn, as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, but also to trust God’s promise. The promise is first of all that we have been forgiven and the price has been paid. But the promise is also that if we trust God we are given life that the desert cannot take from us. If the promise came from a preacher, you’d be a fool to trust it. People are unreliable. But this promise is not from one preacher or many, or from a book; this promise is from God, the one whose word is always good, whose promise stands forever.

Let us prepare our hearts to come to the table of comfort—right here, in the middle of the desert—for Jesus has opened up a highway for God in our hearts. I am that highway, Jesus says. If you have seen me, God has revealed his glory to you. These are words of comfort and joy.