

“The Obnoxious Voice of Peace”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Isaiah 40:1-11
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on December 10, 2017

Last week Advent began with a sorrowful lament, begging God to make an appearance. This week we hear these words on the lips of God: “Comfort, O comfort, my people.” Last week they prayed, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” This week God says, “Speak *tenderly* to Jerusalem. Tell her that the glory of the Lord is about to be revealed!” Last week the people cried out to a silent God. This week, God speaks.

Advent Week One: The people desperately petition God. Advent Week Two: God promises deliverance. It makes for such a nice progression that I hate to spoil it for you by pointing out that actually we’re reading in reverse chronological order. This week we read Isaiah chapter 40. Last week we read Isaiah 64. This week God is speaking to the exiles in Babylon, telling them they have served their term, the penalty is paid, they can now go home. Last week they were *already* home, sitting amongst the ruins of the temple and the rubble of their dreams—disillusioned, disappointed, and despairing. Going home turned out not to be all it was cracked up to be.

This week there is this voice with a vision calling out that the long thick overgrown wilderness that stretches between the feeling of exile and the feeling of home is about to be transformed—that seemingly impassible terrain standing in the way of loneliness turning into belonging is suddenly going to become a highway, a straight and clear path in which whole mountains are brought low and deep valleys raised up so that God’s people will have a level, easy journey home.

But last week they’d already coasted down that highway, arrived at their much-anticipated destination, and discovered devastation. Instead of finding wholeness, they found more brokenness.

So it’s not exactly fair to say that this is the week the story gets better because actually we are telling the story backwards. We are listening in to an earlier part of the story where the promise of going home is fresh and exciting, and the disappointment of arrival is still far away and unforeseen.

As readers, we have a vantage point that the characters in the story don’t have. We know what’s coming. As happy as it sounds to be returning home from exile, we know that before long they will be wailing to God about all that has gone wrong and begging God to come set it right.

So what are we to do with this comforting declaration that the way home is just around the bend while also knowing “home” isn’t going to turn out to be so wonderful after all? Are our Scripture readings just more confirmation that life is mostly good for delivering disappointments? Or is there Gospel here?

If there is good news, how? We've already read the next chapter and know what lies at the end of the road. Does it even matter that God's going to make a highway in the wilderness? Is it good news that you can skate your way smoothly home if there isn't the right kind of warm embrace waiting for you once you get there?

When Christians read this passage in hindsight we understand it is about the return from exile in Babylon. We also understand it is about *more than* the return home from exile in Babylon. The disappointment the Israelites experience upon returning may be the next chapter of the story, but it isn't the last chapter. There is still more to the story.

Isaiah 40 contains an immediate and literal promise of return to Jerusalem, *and* it hints at a future, deeper sense of return, of homecoming, of reunion. If the Israelites were to have asked Isaiah, "Do you mean to say that God is at work in the here and now details of our lives or that God is at work on something bigger, beyond our time and beyond our generation?" Isaiah's answer would have been YES. God is making the rough places smooth right in front of your feet AND God is playing the long game. It's both.

Centuries later Isaiah's prophecy would be used again, this time in Roman occupied Jerusalem, this time in reference to John the Baptist, herald of the good news of Jesus Christ: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" In other words, the good news of God's prophets keeping being recycled, keeps making new appearances among new generations.

Centuries *after* Christ, we will hear Isaiah's words on the mouth of yet another prophet who will cry out into the thick wilderness of segregation, "I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

You see, even after Christ came, God's people continued to find themselves disappointed, lonely, and without a home among their neighbors. God's people have continued to experience exile and God's people have continued to find their former places of home infested with strife. It's happened to the people ripped from their homelands and forced to be slaves—not only way back then but also today. It's happened to the refugees who have fled from war only to be turned away by countries who prosper. It's happened to the natives of this country whose land was stolen from underneath them. It's happened to those who've had the church ripped out from beneath them and sold to the puppets of power. There are so many ways people lose their homes, and even after Christ cleared the path to God and to wholeness, still we experience brokenness. Still we find ourselves alone and lonely and plagued from time to time with fierce disappointment.

And still . . . still God raises up new prophets who sing back the ancient words we have always known but forgotten how to hear. Still God raises up voices in the thick wilderness terrain of our exile, leading the way, pointing us home.

But I must warn you—prophets are *annoying*. Remember Jesus? A prophet is never welcome in his hometown. Because a prophet isn't allowed just to bring words of comfort to *you*. A prophet is tasked with bringing the words of God's peace to *everyone*. If *anything* about your "peace" keeps a brother or sister in bondage, the prophet is required to say, "That isn't peace." It sure isn't the peace of Christ that surpasses understanding, that will guard your hearts and minds. It is what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "negative peace which is the absence of tension" as opposed to a "positive peace which is the presence of justice." Prophets are tasked with telling the most uncomfortable truths.

The fact that the Israelites were willing to show up in Jerusalem after exile and name what was still broken, still lost, still unjust . . . that was good. That was prophetic. It meant they were still listening for God. It meant they were awake. It meant that when the next prophet arose, they would be ready. It meant they understood the kind of peace God is really after, and they weren't going to settle for a counterfeit. It meant they knew peace wasn't something you play at or something you try to create by ignoring what isn't right about the world. Maybe they even knew that it wasn't peace for them if it wasn't also peace for their neighbor.

Look, I still believe God is in the business of leveling, and I wish I could tell you that this time, it will be smooth sailing from here on out. But, the truth is, even as God levels, things will get rocky again.

Another way to explain it is that we humans are like grass—we rise as leaders one day, tall and strong, then wither the next. Our integrity is as reliable as a green lawn in a Texas summer. As long as this world is full of humans, we're going to keep getting disappointed. Here's the thing I want you to count on—as many times as we mess this world up, God's love will endure forever. As many times as human goodness wilts and fades away, steadfast love and righteousness will still be meeting somewhere in God's universe, springing up from the ground with the faithfulness of bluebonnets along the highway in March.

Which isn't to say we're just a bunch of screw-ups, so thank goodness for God or the world would just rot. No. How else do you think God's faithfulness springs up from the ground except through us? Take comfort, my people, take comfort. A wildflower is no less beautiful because it doesn't last as long as God. You, beloved, are not mere recipients of this peace God is bringing to earth, nor obstacles in God's way. You are its harbinger, its herald, its vessel, its voice. Don't you know? Don't you see? You are the one preparing the way of the Lord this time. You are voice in the wilderness; you are prophet; you are peace. You are John, you are Martin, you are Mary. Sing back to us the ancient words we have always known but forgotten how to hear. Sing to us. Sing to us. Cry out to the exiles and point the way home. Amen.