

**Second Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
10 December 2023**

Isaiah 40:1-11

When I was a child of no more than five or six I decided to run away from home. I don't quite remember the offense or the offender, but I remember putting a few clothes in a small backpack and setting off. I walked the streets for hours, visited with friends and played soccer in several backyards, ate the few snacks I had packed for the journey, and then, exhausted, I sat by a water fountain in the downtown area of my hometown. And there I waited for someone to find me, a relative, a friend of the family, perhaps my own dad, or a neighbor. But no one came to find me. I sat at that park crying for what seemed like an eternity, but no one ever came. When I walked back into my house with my tail between my legs, one of my sisters said, "There is some food for you on the table. Go wash up before it gets cold." Years later I learned one of my siblings had been watching me from a distance the entire time, under instructions not to rescue me until I was ready to return. Today we have a story of lostness in Isaiah, which leads to the fulfillment of many of the book's prophecies. But first, some context.

For thirty-nine chapters, Isaiah has been prophesying about the wickedness of Judah, "sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!" Isaiah calls Judah "a woman of ill repute" and freely announces God's judgement upon her, "You have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob." In particular, the land is filled with soothsayers and diviners. There are idols everywhere and many different people groups practice their pagan cults within reach of the Temple. In their arrogance, the people believe God doesn't see their evil or doesn't care, but Isaiah says to them, "The pride of everyone shall be brought low; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day." God will remove all protection from his people and their lifestyle will lead them to ruin. "Your men shall fall by the sword and your warriors in battle. And the gates of Jerusalem shall lament and mourn; ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground." All of this because justice has been perverted and no one cares for the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the alien. In fact, they treat each other as enemies and not as friends. The injustice of the nation will cause the presence of the Lord to depart from the Temple, leaving them unprotected. They will be scattered, but one day God will gather the remnant of Israel under the rule of a descendant of David who will "stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

Thirty-nine chapters of oracles of judgement against the nations and against Israel's kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, from the year 740 to 670 BCE. These were turbulent times when Israel lost the Northern 10 tribes to Assyria and became a vassal of the great kingdom. Later on, Israel rebelled against Assyria, after signing a treaty with Egypt. This led to a painful siege of Jerusalem and a severe famine in the land, but Israel survived and actually experienced some peace. Isaiah thirty-nine ends with a curious episode of some visitors sent from King Baladan of Babylon to king Hezekiah in the year 701 BCE, on the occasion of the king's recovery from a long illness. In his naivete, Hezekiah shows all his treasures to these emissaries, which Isaiah finds incredibly unwise. The chapter ends with these warnings, "Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall

be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

After all these words of judgement, we come to chapter forty with those brilliant words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” The setting has changed greatly between thirty-nine and forty. We are no longer in the 670's but over a hundred years later, between the year 539 to 528. The people of God have been in captivity in Babylon since 605BCE when the first wave of exiles was brought to Babylon. After this, there was the destruction of the temple and a mass exile in 586 when Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar. They had decades to think about their betrayal of the covenants. Their kings had failed God, choosing ill-advised deals with earthly kings, rather than trusting God and obeying his edicts. The people felt abandoned by God, punished for their disobedience, completely alone, and forgotten. The prophecies of Isaiah had all come to pass. Israel had lost their temple, their institutions, their land, their festivals, and their “most favored nation” status with God. Now they wonder if there will ever be a future for them. They cry out to God for forgiveness, feeling like their story is over and God was done with his people.

But now, within seventy years of the exile, Isaiah is preaching a word of comfort. The Persians had conquered the Babylonian empire and Cyrus had allowed the Jews to return to their lands. Isaiah then announces that God will personally come to his people's aid. One of the voices in the song today commands, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God... Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” For decades the prophets of Israel had spoken about the presence of God leaving the Temple because of the people's transgression. Now this voice states that the presence of God will return to his people. This is a promise the people can trust. Although humans are like grass that withers and fades, only God stands forever. The people will once again hear God's voice from the hills of Zion as in ages past. The voice commands, “say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.”

And then, we see something really tender and beautiful about this God. Although powerful and almighty, this God will come as a gentle shepherd, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom.” God will come to dwell with his people and with gentleness and love he will gather the remnant of Israel. Their story is not over. God has remembered them in his mercy as God did in Egypt during the time of Moses. The prophecies of Isaiah 9:2 have come to pass, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.” God has chosen to be on the side of humanity. The people of God in captivity must be obedient now and prepare for the long journey home. God will meet them in the highways. God will guide them home. Although they felt completely abandoned, God had always been watching from a safe distance, waiting for the nation to come to their senses. Always near, always waiting. All that the people of God need to do now is to return home.

Sadly, even though Isaiah 40-66 is a powerful invitation to trust in God and to return home, only about ten percent of the Jews in Babylon trusted God enough to return home (about 50,000). The rest chose to stay in Babylon, where they had set up homes, created businesses,

settled into communities, and created their own traditions. In this I see great similarities between Isaiah and Jesus of Nazareth. Today we hear how John the Baptizer fulfills Isaiah: He is the one who prepares the way for the Lord. After him, Jesus will be God's presence returning to his Temple and his people. Jesus will come to lead people from bondage to freedom. He is the God on the side of humanity announced by the Scriptures. He comes at a moment of absolute darkness, is born in darkness, arrested in darkness, tried in darkness, died in darkness, and rose from the dead in darkness, yet he is the light of the world. He is the great light given to those who walked in darkness, yet few listened to his message. Few dared follow. Men and women of his day chose to remain in darkness rather than follow the light. They refused to accept the possibility that God's Messiah could be a humble man from Galilee. He didn't fit their mold. They didn't contemplate the possibility that he might be the shoot of Jesse. The Messiah.

I believe there is great darkness in the world today. Our world is in as much need of this Messiah as people in the Babylonian exile and people in first century Palestine, but our world also has reservations. We don't want this Jesus to upset our status quo. We don't want this Jesus to unsettle our comfortable lives, to challenge our deeply held ideas, and to turn us from inward looking believers to outward looking disciples. Our world is in darkness, but the light who came two thousand years ago will soon be here. I pray that as we prepare to celebrate another anniversary of his birth, we may also prepare for his return. Amen!