

Ash Wednesday Reflections

Isaiah 40:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 18, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
²Speak 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.
³A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.
⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass;
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
⁷The grass withers; the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
⁸The grass withers; the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.
(Isaiah 40:1-8, NRSV)



I hope you have been reading along with us through the prophet Isaiah this season. Tonight I want to spend a few minutes on a key passage in that book which serves as the major turning point in the whole prophesy. As a reminder, Isaiah was a prophet sent by God in the 8th century before Christ to speak a message of both judgment and hope to Israel. God was going to bring judgment and punishment on Israel because of their persistent rebellion, and he was going to do so through the nation of Babylon, his instrument of judgment. The first 39 chapters of the book speak of this judgment. There are messages of hope woven throughout these chapters, because that is the other major theme of Isaiah, but this part of the book is the hardest to get through. If you made it through, well done!

Everything shifts in chapter 40. Now Isaiah is speaking to Israel while they are in exile. For 70 years these people had been in Babylon, away from their homes, their temple, their whole way of life. God's judgment upon them has been realized. Now the prophet is directed to speak words of hope. God has not forgotten his promises, his covenant to his chosen people. He never forgets his promises, though after 70 years some of them might have wondered if he had forgotten.

When was a time in your life when you wondered if God had forgotten you, or forgotten promises you believe he made to you? When was a time when you felt overwhelmed by despair, when you found it hard to have hope for the future? Can you remember feeling smothered by darkness, or grief, or discouragement, or the shame and guilt of your own failure? Maybe some of you are in that place even now.

Can you hear the words God first spoke through Isaiah to his people, words which echo right down to this moment? "**Comfort, comfort my people.**" He says it twice for emphasis. The word "comfort" here carries with it a depth of tenderness. This is not cold sympathy from a distance. Picture a mother gathering her weeping child in her arms. The child is sad beyond what words can express. So the mother doesn't try to explain things or solve things. That's not what the little one needs. So this mother simply holds her child and wipes away the tears.

Is it possible for you to imagine, even to believe, that in those dark moments of life, that the Lord is closer to you than you imagine, and saying to you, "You are not alone. I am with you. I share your tears." We can grow so weary in this life, even as people who walk with Jesus. We wonder when the Lord will finally do what he has promised to do, in our lives and in our world. How long will it take for things to be set right? And in response the Lord gives us his presence. Not necessarily answers or solutions, but his presence. Is that enough for today? Will it be enough for tomorrow?

Of course, along with his presence comes assurance. There is no confusion in the reality Isaiah is given to declare, and to declare with tenderness. Punishment is over. Sin has been paid for. Judgment has been

exercised. And as a result, God's people have been set free.

Brennan Manning was a Catholic priest who, as a life-long alcoholic, learned to lean hard into this assurance of God's grace, and not just for himself but for others as well. He tells the story of a time he spoke at a large gathering years ago. At the end of each evening's service, he extended an invitation for healing prayer. Many people responded. So he would stay late and meet with individuals in a side room. On one night the line went out the door. He patiently met and prayed with each person, and it was long after midnight when he made his way back to his room. He was so exhausted that he fell into bed with his clothes still on.

About 3:00 in the morning he heard a rap on the door and a squeaky little voice: "Brennan, can I talk to you?" When he opened the door he found a 78-year-old nun standing there. She began to cry.

"Sister? What can I do for you?", he asked. Then he found two chairs in the empty hallway and they sat down so that she could tell him her story. I'll read to you the account of what happened as he remembers it:

"I've never told anyone this in my entire life," she began. "It started when I was five years old. My father would crawl into my bed with no clothes on. He would touch me there and tell me to touch him there; he said it's what our family doctor said we should do. When I was nine, my father took my virginity. By the time I was twelve, I knew of every kind of sexual perversion you read about in dirty books. Brennan, do you have any idea how dirty I feel? I've lived with so much hatred of my father and hatred of myself that I would only go to Communion when my absence would be conspicuous."

In the next few minutes, I prayed with her for healing. Then I asked her if she would find a quiet place every morning for the next thirty days, sit down in a chair, close her eyes, upturn her palms, and pray this one phrase over and over: ABBA, I BELONG TO YOU.

It's a prayer of exactly seven syllables, the number that corresponds perfectly to the rhythm of our breathing. As you inhale – *Abba*. As you exhale – *I belong to you*.

Through her tears she agreed: "Yes, Brennan, I will."

One of the most moving and poetic follow-up letters I've ever received came from this sister. In it she described the inner healing of her heart, a complete forgiveness of her father, and an inner peace she'd never known in her seventy-eight years. She concluded her letter with these words: *A year ago, I would've signed this letter with my real name in religious life – Sister Mary Genevieve. But from now on I'm Daddy's little girl.*¹

Whether your shame and heaviness of heart is because of your own sin, or because of the sin of another against you, is it possible for you to find rest in the reality that Brennan Manning communicated to Sister Mary that night, the same rest which Isaiah declares is available to all who come to God. This rest is readily available, of course, because Christ has established it. In Christ, we are forgiven. In Christ, we are made clean. In Christ, we can leave all shame behind. If you hold yourself up to the Lord tonight, your true self not your pretend self, exposing all the things which cause you shame and pain, can you hear the Lord speak to you words of comfort as you do? Can you believe once again that he is your Father, that you are his beloved son or daughter, and that you belong to him? Brennan Manning writes, "For His love is never, never, never based on our performance, never conditioned by our moods - elation or depression. The furious love of God knows no shadow of alteration or change. It is reliable. And always tender."

It's in light of all this that the voice calls out again. God's people are told that *now* is the time to prepare the way for the Lord. Valleys raised up. Mountains and hills made low. Crooked places made straight and level. For God has not forgotten us, or forgotten his promises to us. He is coming. So we should prepare ourselves for his glory to be revealed.

In the ancient world, kings would send messengers ahead of them when they traveled so that the roads could be built up, leveled out, and straightened before their arrival. The king did not want to face obstacles that might impede his coming. Before Jesus bursts on the scene years later after Isaiah, his cousin, John the Baptist, echoed these same words to the people of his generation. It was a call for repentance, a call for people to turn back to God, and to remove any obstacles in their lives which might keep them from being ready to receive him – pride, hard hearts, injustice towards others.² This is therefore a perfect call for us to heed at the outset of this season of Lent, a season when Christians for many generations have given themselves

¹ Brennan Manning, *The Furious Longing of God* (David C. Cook, 2009), 45-46.

² See Luke 3:14-18

to re-centering their lives on Christ by removing obstacles which have either distracted or diminished.

But remember, this call for repentance comes *after* the declaration of God's grace. We don't repent as a way of receiving God's grace, but rather we repent as a response to God's grace which comes to us long before we have even thought of repenting. So in response to the furious, reliable, unchanging, tender love that God has poured out on us in Christ, how might we use this coming season to better honor him and prepare for his coming into our lives and into our world? We cannot facilitate his return, any more than the Israelites could facilitate their own release from exile. But we can prepare ourselves for it, and then be ready when he arrives.

In the meantime, a voice cries out to remind us that apart from him we are frail. **"All people,"** we are told, **"are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them."**

Billionaire tech investor Peter Thiel might not agree. In a recent interview he was asked if he believed humanity can conquer death, and whether we should want to try to do so in the first place. He replied, "We haven't even tried. We should either conquer death or at least figure out why it's impossible." He's hopeful. So much so that he has arranged to be cryogenically preserved after he dies so that when the technologically catches up to death, he can be brought back to life.³ Best of luck, Peter.

Though most people don't go to those lengths, or have the financial means to do so even if they wanted to, there are still many people – perhaps most people – who don't want to live daily with the reality made stark in these verses. I've heard it said, "People who are self-sufficient do not respond eagerly to good news from God."⁴ I don't want to be one of those people. Every time somebody in our community dies we light a candle in worship that following Sunday to announce their death and offer prayers. Do you ever sit there when that happens and wonder about the day when it will be your name announced when the candle is lit? I do. I know it's coming.

The imagery here is striking. When we were kids we would pluck a dandelion and blow hard on it. All those tiny seeds would disperse in the wind. One breath and they were gone. That's the image here. One breath from the Lord and we're all gone. Flowers are beautiful

one day, almost perfect. But how are those Valentine's Day flowers looking now? A little saggy? How about a week from now? This is not all that different from our lives, and not just our bodies, but even our faithfulness. It's all so short lived. Today of all days this should be clear. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you were made, and to dust you shall return. Me too.

This would be the most hopeless and dark message of all if it were not paired with the message which comes before and after. Yes, our lives are fleeting, but not so the word of God. God's promises never fail. That means that even though God may seem distant, he is always with us, and always has been with us. Even though darkness seems to rule the day, the light is breaking in. Even though sin, our own and the sin of others, lays shame and guilt heavy on us, the Lord has set us free by his grace once and for all. Even though God's judgment and wrath will have their say, God's grace and love will have the final word. Weeping may remain for the night, but joy is coming in the morning. Until it does, our God of comfort is there with us. Yes, the grass withers and the flowers fall, and it will not be easy when they do. But the word of our God endures forever.⁵

Amen.

³ Steve Mollman, *Fortune Online*, May 3, 2023.

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 6 (Zondervan, 1986), 242.

⁵ In Mark 13:31 Jesus himself declares, **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."**