

“Comfort in Exile”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Isaiah 40: 1-11

It can be hard to impart discipline on someone else. Parents are constantly faced with this challenge, whether our children are young or old. A two-year-old throws a toy at another child, and we must find a way to explain to the two-year-old that such behavior is not helpful. Some would slap the child on their rear. Others would send the child to “time-out.” Still others would simply say, “Don’t do that.” Discipline takes on many forms, for there are many forms of parent-child relationships.

As a child grows older, the discipline must adapt to new situations. A teenager fails to come home at the appointed hour on a Friday night, and there needs to be a consequence. Driving privileges might be taken away. He or she might be grounded for a specific amount of time. Unfortunately, some parents might resort to unhealthy forms of discipline, such as verbal or physical abuse. Discipline takes on many forms, for there are many forms of parent-child relationships.

What is the purpose of discipline? The purpose of discipline is to right a wrong behavior. The point is to turn someone from doing something unhealthy – to themselves or to others – and turn them toward doing something healthy and constructive. That is why as parents we seek to discipline our children when they are young, so they might grow into healthy patterns of behavior. That is why it is harder as adults to both receive and administer discipline, for our patterns of behavior are more established and less-likely to change, due to our comfort and security.

The people of Israel had ceased to act faithfully to the Lord their God. They had followed other gods. They had chosen their own ways rather than God’s ways. And no form of discipline that God executed seemed to bring them back to healthy, faithful behavior. The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah reflect God’s attempt at discipline, warning them over and over to repent from their unfaithful ways. But when they would not respond, God did the only other thing that he thought would work: he sent his people into exile. Conquered by a foreign army, taken away from their homeland, the Israelites are now experiencing the ultimate form of discipline.

Someone in our bible study on Tuesday commented that it seems awfully unfair that the Israelites in exile were being punished for unfaithfulness that previous generations had shown. Indeed, on the surface, such judgment can seem arbitrary and callous. Why would God punish this group in exile for what their grandparents and great-grandparents had done?

And yet, as we said earlier, God’s discipline does not stand on its own without God’s love and desire for redemption. That is why the first words out

of the prophet's mouth to his people, who have been living in exile for over a hundred years, is not more anger and disgust. God's first words are words of hope in the midst of their exile.

"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" (40:1-2).

On Tuesday, we discussed what it means to be in exile, and what forms of exile we experience today. Someone made the astute observation that exile implies something has happened not of our own choosing. We don't freely choose to go into exile; it is forced upon us against our will. And yet, even in exile, God speaks words of comfort, hope, and peace.

We see modern-day refugees in exile on our television and computer screens. People in places such as Syria, Iraq, Africa, and Mexico flee persecution and insecurity so they won't be eradicated. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to them: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and all people shall see the glory of the Lord together."

Extreme poverty exiles women, men and children from the rest of humanity. Many times, an unforeseen circumstance can create a domino effect that tumbles lives out of control. The loss of a job, a hospital bill that insurance won't cover, a child in trouble with the law - all of these and more can lead to desperate poverty, even on our doorsteps. The emotional and spiritual exile of the poor is extreme. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to them: "The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

We do not choose to grieve - grief chooses us when we experience great loss of some form or another. And grief can cause us to experience exile. A friendship breaks apart, and grief exiles us from other interconnected relationships. A loved one dies, and grief exiles us from our normal routine, and we walk along a path that is uncertain and strange. Exile most certainly can be identified by isolation and loneliness, and grief often leads to similar feelings. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to us: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

For even in our most hopeless moments, our most challenging times, our greatest feelings of exile, God does not abandon us; God comforts us in exile: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them close to his heart, and gently lead the mother sheep."

This Advent Season is more than a time to get things ready for Christmas and accomplish all of our tasks on the to-do list. This Advent Season is a time to stop, to listen, and wait for the Word which God is speaking to each of us right here, right now.

"A voice cries out." Can you hear it? Are you listening for it? What needs to change in order for you to draw closer to God's expectant Word?

May we have ears to hear and hearts to comprehend the Word of hope and comfort we expectantly await to arrive in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.