

Prepare
Isaiah 40:1-11
John Breon

Kim Gannon was a song writer who pitched one of his songs to a record company in the early 1940s. They turned it down because the executives thought it was too sad for families during war time. But one day Gannon was playing golf with Bing Crosby and sang the song for him. Crosby decided to record it. This song became the flip side of "White Christmas" and it too became a hit. It's the song "I'll Be Home for Christmas." Coming in the middle of World War II, it expressed the desire of soldiers to be home at Christmas. Gannon later said he thought of it as speaking for anyone who couldn't be home at Christmas. Since Bing Crosby, nearly 150 other artists have recorded it over the years (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27ll_Be_Home_for_Christmas, accessed 12/2/14).

Many other songs and stories include this longing to be home for Christmas, to be with people we love in places we know. Messed up as families can be, Christmas gives us hope that we can get together. Home can be a place of comfort, of peace, of love.

This passage from Isaiah is a homecoming story. It begins, "Comfort, comfort my people," says God. Then there are three "voices" that show how God's comfort comes or what helps us receive that comfort.

Before we listen to those voices, we need to understand what comfort is. Is it just being at ease, feeling *comfortable*? Is it just a nice, soft, cozy experience? That's how we often think of comfort. But the word itself is much stronger. In fact, the word comfort means "with strength." When God comforts, God gives strength by being with us. We find strength when we realize that God is with us. We find strength by being with each other. We share strength with each other.

God's comfort for the exiles in Babylon meant the end of their exile, the finishing of their suffering, and the invitation to come home. God wanted to bring his people home. But persuading them that returning to Judah was God's will meant convincing them that God had forgiven them

for the sins that had led to the exile and that they would be able to survive the journey back home (homileticsonline.com, 12/5/99).

So God directs heavenly messengers to speak to his people. And the messages that come from those “voices” carry comfort to God’s people. The prophet overhears God’s instructions to the heavenly court and passes the word on to the people.

Comfort first comes for God’s people in exile in this message: The time is up. You have finished your term in exile. Your debt is paid. Your sin has been paid for.

The sins that caused the people to be exiled are forgiven, cancelled, paid for. They needed that word of assurance so they could believe they really could go home. Their time in Babylon, their suffering in exile was like payment for the sins God was punishing them for—sins like idolatry and oppressing the poor and relying on themselves or some foreign power instead of on the Lord God.

In the New Covenant we hear the good news that our sin is paid for, our debt is clear, our penalty has been served. But we didn’t pay it ourselves. Jesus, God’s Son and our Savior, paid the price for all of us. The penalty of sin is death, and Jesus took on himself the penalty for our sin when he died for us. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it showed that the penalty truly was paid, that forgiveness is real, and that new life is possible.

Now, after the announcement of the end of exile and the forgiveness of sins, come three more messages that bring comfort to God’s people.

First, there is a voice calling, shouting, “In the wilderness, prepare the way for the LORD.” Comfort comes when God’s messengers *prepare a way*. The image here recalls Israel’s exodus from Egypt and their wilderness wanderings. God led them through the desert and provided for them until God brought them to the land of promise. This section of Isaiah often speaks of the return from Babylon as a new exodus. Also, the idea of preparing a way comes from the practice of going before a king to get the road ready for the royal procession. The Babylonians also had special roads they prepared for festive processions of their gods.

What's involved in preparing the way? How do you build a road? We happen to have someone on staff who knows about this because he did it for years. Let's hear Jeff Hiller describe road-building from a Department of Transportation engineer's perspective:

Preparing a highway for the King of kings; if you have heard any stories of the effort that goes into preparation for the President to come to town you can imagine what the king's council was up to making way for the royal procession. Much effort would be made to make the journey safe, presentable, and easy to traverse. Today we have a well-defined system of roads, highways, and airports. So, the Secret Service focuses on safety and the President's advisors focus on who will be present for the big event.

In Isaiah's day, the king's staff might actually build a road to move the king and his caravan efficiently. I am not sure what the terrain was like around Babylon but, much of Israel is not an easy place to walk. Think about a hike around the lake or a trek into the woods to the deer stand ...before anyone blazed a trail or cut a path. Remember what it was like scouting out the property the new church is sitting on? It is difficult to climb through the brush, around the rocks, over the hills, and through the streams.

To build a highway or even a path we look for the easy way through the terrain. We all want something easy to traverse and as short as possible. When nature does not meet that criteria road builders cut down the hills and move the dirt to the valleys. They may have to remove boulders or trees and bridge over creeks to make a level path.

The road builders Isaiah new would have been trying to accommodate pack animals and humans. Their goal would be to give sure footing (something solid to step on), and manageable slopes (engineers call them grades). Curves would not have required much attention but, just look at the worn grass on a college campus, we do favor the path of least resistance. Make it straight whenever possible.

Today with vehicles that exceed 80,000 pounds and cover more than a mile in a minute, highway engineers have to be more considerate of the stability of the road bed, the smoothness of the alignment (the path followed), how far ahead the operator can see to be able to react to obstructions, and give them a safe space to take evasive action.

Well, I am about to lead us off track. Back to Isaiah. What the prophet is telling us, is that God desires an easy path to unite with his people. In our trek back from exile God wants to move the boulders out of the way, bridge over the canyons, and make it easy to get from here to there. No longer do we have to blaze a trail through the rough terrain. God has built a smooth, quick express route to bring us together. All we need is to follow his signs and his map.

The exiles in Babylon would have understood that this call for preparation meant that God was on the move. God was about to do something. They may have been on the move themselves, starting the journey back to Judah. They could know that God's power would make a way for them to follow and that they were following a way that leads to seeing God's glory.

Each of the four Gospels cites this passage in relation to John the Baptist. The Gospel writers saw John fulfilling the role of the voice crying out to prepare the way of the Lord. John, as the forerunner of Jesus, was getting people ready for Jesus to come and appear and do his work.

This time of year is full of preparations. Maybe you'll have company this Christmas and you want the house to be ready for them. Maybe you'll be traveling and you're preparing for your trip. There is food to cook and there are presents to buy. The children have been preparing for their program. The choir has been preparing for the cantata. The church is preparing to move

But how do we prepare for Jesus? How do we get ready for him to come? John the Baptist prepared the way by calling people to repent—to change their attitude and turn back to God. He offered baptism as a way of showing repentance and experiencing forgiveness. In Luke's account, John

tells the people to show the fruit of repentance in changed lives, especially in how they treat others (Lk 3:7-14).

Advent is a time of reflection and repentance as we ask ourselves, "Am I ready for what God wants to do? Am I prepared for the new thing God is doing?" We don't have to wait for Jesus to arrive—he's here. Will we receive him, welcome him and worship him?

The next voice (verse 6) calls on the prophet to cry out or preach. The prophet says, "What should I say? What's the use? All people are like grass that withers and flowers that fall." The prophet resists God's outpouring of grace and expresses the defeated nation's sorrow and despair (Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, The Old Testament Library).

The objection here is that nothing lasts, life is short, people are fragile and weak. So why bother with messages of hope or journeys out of exile?

The answer comes, "Yes, the grass does wither and flowers do fade, but the word of our God stands forever." Life is short and fragile. It's like bows and wrapping paper on Christmas morning—gone and discarded so quickly. Still, God gives comfort when you *preach God's word*.

From the human point of view, preaching to the dying remnant of the Jewish people does seem pointless. And yet the hopelessness of the situation is confronted with the reality of God's word. God's word is not temporary; it endures forever. God's powerful word not only creates something new; it also implants in the world something that endures. When we hear God's word we have the opportunity to enter into it and share in its permanence (Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, Vol 2, 121). We can become part of something bigger and more lasting than anything we can be or do on our own.

A preacher had gone back to a church he had served years before to help with the funeral of an old friend. After the service and the graveside service and the meal provided by the church women, the family stayed and visited. The oldest daughter, Kathryn, was thirteen years old when he served that church. He says she was the worst thirteen-year-old he had ever seen. She was noisy, in and out, pushing, shoving, breaking things, never stayed in the room or out of the room, never paid attention. "If there's one person

that doesn't know a thing I've said in the time I was here, it would be Kathryn."

Kathryn, now an executive, had premature gray sprinkled in her hair. As they sat at the table and talked, the preacher said, "I'm sorry, it's such a tough time." She and her dad were very close.

She said, "It is tough. When Mother called and said that Dad had died of a heart attack, I was just scrambling for something. Then I remembered a sermon you had preached on the meaning of the Lord's Supper."

He said, "You're kidding." Then she told him something he had said in that sermon.

Who knows? Who knows? (*Craddock Stories* 30-31). When your witness conveys God's word, someone may just remember it and experience its staying power.

Finally, a voice is called to *proclaim good news* to Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. Zion is another word for Jerusalem. Here, the city represents the people of Israel.

What good tidings come to the people? What is this good news? "Lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!'" The good news is that God is with the people. God comes to them, leads them through the wilderness, and returns them to the land he had given them.

This herald is to proclaim the advent or coming of the Lord *now*, and to proclaim it without fear, even if it still lies in the future. The call is to praise God who comes to help his people as if the help has already come.

For the comfort to become effective, Zion (the people of Israel) must herself accept and assent to the message of the coming salvation. If now, while still in exile, she is bold enough to break into jubilation at it, then she has accepted it. (Westermann)

This prophetic word was fulfilled when the exiles left Babylon and returned to Judah. But there is a greater fulfillment of it. Handel captures this in *The Messiah* when he places these verses from Isaiah 40 (along with 60:1) right after the verse from Isaiah 7:14:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, "God with us."

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain! O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, behold your God! Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.

The good news is that God comes to us. God comes in Jesus Christ to be one of us and one with us. Listen to this description of the God who came to Israel, who came in Jesus, who is with us now, and who will come again. Notice how Handel ties Isaiah's description of God to the New Testament description of Jesus:

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd, and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom and gently lead those that are with young.

Come unto Him, all ye that labour, come unto Him ye that are heavy laden, and He will give you rest. Take His yoke upon you, and learn of Him, for He is meek and lowly of heart, and ye shall find rest for your souls. His yoke is easy, His burden is light [Matthew 11:28-30].

God comes to make his home with us so we can know what home truly is, so we can be at home with God. We're at home with God now as we live by faith and as we're part of God's family. We have the great hope of being at home with God forever. "Let every heart prepare him room."

Being at home means eating together. Let's share the meal of God's kingdom.