

“God’s Promise: A Way in the Wilderness”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 8, 2019

Isaiah 40:1-11

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.

A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every 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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; 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. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

Anne Turner was diagnosed with “an aggressive but early stage breast cancer”, and writes about how the diagnosis sent her into exile from her former life. “Cancer brings all kinds of struggle,” she says in an [essay for the Christian Century magazine](#), describing chemo side effects, her weakened immune system, and “fatigue that put me to bed before it was dark out. But perhaps the hardest loss was my hair. It was public and strangely shaming.” Having spent time in recent months with close family living through cancer, I can attest to ways that the disease and its treatment are a disorientating, bizarre, life-altering, all-consuming estrangement from what used to be considered “normal life”.

The Babylonian Exile was to the Hebrew people what cancer and chemo are to individuals—a massive interruption which leaves them forever changed. After generations of prophetic warning and centuries of unfaithful rulers, the Assyrian empire defeated the northern country of Israel. Jerusalem itself survived the invasion, but when Babylonians overtook the Assyrians some years later, they conquered Jerusalem also after a two-year siege. In the aftermath, all the higher-ups—the princes, governors, leaders and judges—were forcibly deported to Babylon. There they were kept in exile for seventy years, long enough to have children and grandchildren, but never to see their homes again. They were like Native Americans today, forced from their land and denied their culture for generations. The exiles died knowing that their people had been conquered and their nation removed from the map. There was no future with Yahweh, God of the Israelites.

But today we hear the prophet Isaiah cry out: “It’s not over, folks!” “Comfort, O comfort my people!” There *is* life after Babylon. God has not forgotten you, O exiles. In the wilderness of captivity and disaster, a new road is being laid. Valleys will be lifted up, mountains brought low, uneven ground made smooth and rough places made plain. Freedom, justice and righteousness will be at hand, after generations of bitter trauma.

I feel a strong sense of exile and the wilderness among the American people this very day. We are in exile for our continuing lack of justice and restitution for the descendants of American slaves. Four hundred years of government-authorized, church-sanctioned slavery and its aftermath have created generational inequality in education, housing, employment and incarceration rates. White America is only *starting* to see the shackles of discrimination that still keep our black and brown neighbors in hidden chains. We are in exile, yet “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

The planet itself bears the feverish marks of this wilderness time. Since the Industrial Revolution two hundred and fifty years ago, humans have been sending massive amounts of waste into the air, earth, and water. We've racked up environmental debts that will last for hundreds more years, and the interest on that debt is starting to weigh heavily. Superstorms assault our coastlines and island nations are swallowed by the sea, as "once in a century" floods drown our cities and farmland nearly every year. The garden of God's good creation has caught a terrible fever, and it convulses for relief. We are in exile, yet "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

The overlapping nature of these grievances and many others makes it seem that there is no hope. Our problems mount up, and while human ingenuity has taken us far, we still come up short against so many threats to our life together. It will take nothing less than a spiritual transplant in the whole "body politic" for humans to treat those of all races as images of God's beauty, and to undo this climate catastrophe. No wonder Isaiah says, "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." "The grass withers, the flower fades," and even the best individuals cannot save us from this exile. "Surely the people are grass," Isaiah says, here today and gone tomorrow.

Yet in the very next breath, Isaiah continues: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but...the word of our God will stand forever." Forever! In other words, there is no evil so powerful that God's will can be resisted eternally. No far country of exile is too far for God to rescue us. Babylon WILL be busted, because the word of our God stands forever, and that word is "comfort, O comfort my people". There *is* salvation from exile, though not by human hands. *God* will prepare a highway through the thorniest wilderness, making a way where there has been no way. What look to us now like dead ends and ditches will be revealed as divine detours, leading to new paths of peace. "Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."

Our calling in the meantime is where this morning's passage goes for its conclusion. "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength...lift it up, do not fear." God will prepare the road of possibility through peril, but we are enlisted as messengers and peace-proclaimers along the way. Messengers can attend events with and for people who are different from us, learning other life experiences and experiencing the bridges of humanity. Messengers can dig deeply into the history of racism and its current effects by reading books like *Waking Up White*, as we will do together in Lent. Messengers can make our own daily practices less harmful to the earth by using transit, walking more, and diverting our waste from landfills. We messengers know that the "comfort, O comfort" Isaiah proclaims does not come by sweeping troubles under the rug. That only leads to the hazards we are presently tripping over. Comfort instead comes by proclaiming the peace of God in word and deed. As people who trust in God's salvation, we are called to be heralds, prophets and messengers of another way—God's reign of peace.

Anne Turner, who lost her hair to cancer treatments, describes the slow process of her hair's return. "Chemo ended just after Christmas. It was four months before the stubble lengthened into legitimate hair. I left my wig at home on Easter morning. 'Christ is risen, and so is my hair!' I announced. My hair was back. I was back. Except, there was no back. My hair twisted into gray springy wires unlike any hair I'd ever grown before." "I have returned" to health, Anne Turner writes, "but I will be a stranger to myself for a very long time. This disorientation, this bewilderment—they are the terms of repatriation to my life."

Christians gather on the road from exile to return, in the presence of the word of the Lord, which remains forever. The exiles we pass through—whether at the hands of cancer, Babylon, or any of our current evils—will not leave us unchanged. It won't be the same on the other side of Babylon; God promises a new world marked by the ways of Christ. That new future may even feel like wilderness to us now, while we wrestle with the blessings found therein. Yet no matter what exile exists now or is yet to come, God will be there also. Amen.