

For a long time, I had a rather one-dimensional picture of the prophets in the Bible. I thought the prophets were very angry people. I thought the prophets were armed with righteousness and indignation, and they would ride into town at high noon, pull out their theological pistols, and start shooting one sinner after another. *“God is coming to judge you sinful people.”* BANG! Oh, occasionally some of them offered the people a chance to repent, but most of the time their message seemed to be, *“You’re going to get what’s coming to you!”*

This is a very convenient image of the prophets when it comes to preaching. We preachers can be prophetic. We can identify the sinners and those who have broken the covenant, and we can get out our theological six guns and blast away. We can say things like, *“Think of the starving people around the world, and how little you do to help those children.”* And those words cut to the heart!

But, then, what do we do with Isaiah 40, and with other passages similar to it? Did you notice how it began? The text speaks to the people who once lived in Judah, the area around Jerusalem. *“Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”* This is hardly the language of anger. This is the language of consolation, of reconciliation, of encouragement, of comfort and hope.

So, confronted with texts like this, I had to look again at the calling of the prophets in the Bible, and I found that the essential work of the prophet is to be the mouthpiece of God, to speak to God’s people, helping them recognize those points at which they are living up to the best of what God wants for them, and to recognize when they are failing to live up to the

best that God wants for them.

When God made the covenant with the nation of Judah, God essentially promised, *“I will love you with an everlasting love, and to help you know how to live, I will give you commandments. When you follow the commandments, you are saying, ‘Yes,’ to me and to the covenant, and you will be blessed. When you fail to follow the commandments, then your community’s life will erode and gradually destroy itself.”* For their part, the people promise to love God, to trust God, and to live out their love and trust by following God’s commandments.

From time to time, however, the people of Judah did not live up to their part of the covenant. They sinned. They turned their backs on God. And when that happened, God sent the prophets who tried to help the people see that they were failing to keep their part of the covenant.

AT THOSE MOMENTS, WE CAN HEAR THE PROPHETS SPEAKING WITH A VOICE THAT SOUNDS VERY ANGRY. But it was NOT SO MUCH ANGER, BUT RATHER ANGUISH that the prophets were expressing. Motivated by a deep love for God and God’s people, the prophets were trying to get the nation to change its course, to repent of it’s sin, before the clock struck midnight, before it was too late.

But at this time in the history of the nation of Judah, a different kind of problem had crept into the life of the nation. In the year 586 BC, the Babylonians had overrun their land and captured their leaders and carried them into exile. They were forced from their homes and their land. They left behind Jerusalem and the temple and the other symbols of God’s presence and power and faithfulness. They plodded across five hundred miles of desert to Babylon where they lived among people who did not speak their language, who did not eat their food, who did not know their God. No wonder one of them wrote a song that we now

know as Psalm 137 that begins, *“By the waters of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.”* Can you feel the pain and anguish of it? This is the feeling of exile.

And the longer the community remained in exile, the more discouraged, fearful, and depressed they became. Yes, they had sinned against God, but now they were losing their confidence in God, and they were beginning to wonder whether God would keep the promises He had made to them through the covenant. They wondered if God still loved them. If God would still bless them. If God would still make of them a great nation. The problem was that they did not trust God.

Now, it may seem a little strange to mention these feelings of exile during Advent. After all, we generally think of Advent is a time of anticipation and preparation. We are getting ready to celebrate the presence of God with us through the birth of Jesus Christ. We are hanging the greens and lighting the trees and filling shoe boxes and buying presents for Angel Tree children. The whole season seems to speak of JOY!

Yet, for many, Advent is a time of exile. In describing their feelings, folks might not use that term, but in the Advent and Christmas season, many people feel abandoned, even abandoned by God. And that is the feeling of exile.

Think of how it might be for a woman – eighty-six years old. She had been married for over fifty years, had four children, lived in a white frame house with big, airy windows. But now, a widow for more than a decade. Two of her children dead. Living in a nursing home. Wearing a diaper. That is a feeling of Exile.

Think of how it might be for a man in the prime of life. He has worked hard all of his life. Played by all the rules. Worked nights and on the weekends. Then, out of the blue, a

pink slip, right here at Christmas time. Corporate downsizing they call it. How are you going to buy your kids presents? And as you are punching the time clock for the last time, the security guard at the door says, *“Merry Christmas.”* That’s Exile.

Or think of how it might be for someone twenty-four years old. Young. Bright. Their whole life ahead of them – and then it is discovered that they are dying of leukemia. Feeling weak in body and spirit. Waiting, all right, but not for Advent – but rather for death. Exile.

Or think of the people that you know in this church who are separated from their loved ones this year. For some, the separation has been caused by the death of their loved one. For others, the war has taken members of their family away – and in this holiday season of joy, they are experiencing an incredible feeling of loneliness. That’s Exile.

And what about you? Are you – or is some part of you – in exile? Most of the time, I feel as though I have life by the tail. And yet, every once in a while, I remember how fast the days are going by – how soon I might also be old and alone and dying. And for a moment, at least, I feel exile. How about you?

But then comes a voice. The voice of a prophet. Perhaps it is when I hear the singing of Handel’s *“Messiah.”* *“Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.”* Or maybe it is a familiar Christmas carol announcing that God has come into this world. The prophet tries to help us regain our balance.

When Isaiah spoke, the people of Judah were still in exile. And they were down and discouraged and full of doubt. But the prophet speaks as if the exile is ended. The prophet helps the people imagine the end of exile. The valleys will be lifted up. The mountains will be made low. The uneven ground will become like a plain. All people shall see the glory of God.

*“God is at work,”* the prophet declares. *“God is at work, even in exile.”* The prophet

climbs the hill and announces, "*Here is your God.*" God is already working for you. The exile may not be over, but you are not alone. God is here. God is with you.

God is like a shepherd carrying the lambs. Can you feel it! Can you feel God gathering you into His divine arms and carrying you through your exile? God is warm and strong and present for us much like your mother was that day when you were a child and you had a wreck on your bicycle. You came bursting into the house, bloody knees and bloody elbows, frightened and in tears. She leaned over and wrapped her arms around you and held you for the longest time, and you knew that things would be all right. The cuts did not immediately stop bleeding. There was still pain. And the bruises did not go away instantly. But you were able to bear them better.

The fact is, when Isaiah made his pronouncement, the exile did not end right away for the people of Judah. Every valley did not immediately lift up. Every mountain and obstacle did not disappear. But this promise of God helped the people get through the exile. When we know that God is with us and is already working for us, we can handle the stress and strain of life better.

Old woman, eighty-six years old, in the nursing home: your room is never completely empty. God is with you.

Man in the prime of life: your pink slip is not your only Christmas present. God is with you. That fact may not get you a job right away. It may not remake the social system so that pink slips don't come at Christmas time. But knowing that God is with you will help you stand in line and fill out one more application and go to one more interview. And it may help you stand a little taller when your ego has been crushed.

And young person dying of cancer: the presence of God may not reverse your

disease. But I hope you know that the sovereign God feels every pain and the nausea that comes with your treatment, every sinking of your heart when you look into the mirror and see what is happening to you.

Comfort. Comfort. As I grow older, I become more aware of the pain and suffering of this world, because I've experienced more of it first hand. And I also realize that the comfort that God can offer to us came at a great price. Christ was born into this world – he lived life and suffered a terrible death for you and for me. He suffered, and He feels our suffering. Even when we cause Him pain and suffering, even when we reject Him, Christ is with us and He stays with us and offers us comfort.

As a church, the prophet Isaiah speaks to us this morning. Can you hear God saying to us, "*Comfort, O comfort, my people.*" "*Come, Lord Jesus, quickly come.*"