

“Lifted Up and Made Low”

Isaiah 40:1-11

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The Second Sunday in Advent

The timing seems perfect for the prophetic words of Isaiah. Perfect in terms of where we are on this second Sunday in Advent, and at this particular time in our national life. If the Common Lectionary hadn't served up this Isaiah passage for today, I might have selected it myself as a text from which to preach. Because Isaiah speaks to the times then, which sound all too familiar to the times in which we live.

And some might say this is a running pattern lately—where the scripture text seems to speak directly to the times in which we are living. I might suggest, however, that the times and scenarios described in scripture, using apocalyptic language and imagery, have always been relevant to our times, it's just that we happen to be living at a point in time when we are more acutely aware of it. When the Herods and Caesars of this world, as well the exiles under their rule, are more obvious.

Scholars have long noted and widely accepted that the Book of Isaiah is written in different parts or sections. The first section comprises chapters 1-39, and it speaks to and of a people in exile. 745-700 B.C., to be exact and following the Assyrian invasion. It speaks of a time when the world had been turned upside down.

Isaiah paints a picture of a world in chaos and crisis because the people of God have made unwise choices and have forsaken the ways of God. Therefore, they are exiles—their kings are gone, their temple has been destroyed and their country lies in ruins. They have been removed from the Promised Land and forced to live under Babylonian rule. Even the Psalmist laments, “By the waters of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept remembering Zion” (137:1).

And so early on in Isaiah, listen to how he describes their situation. Hear in the prophet's words how God isn't impressed with their empty, symbolic gestures.

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me (1:11-13). Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil in your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (1:16-17).

And it gets harsher as Isaiah calls out and names their arrogance.

Ah, you call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight!...for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel (5:20-21, 24b). On that day, the Lord will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days will be punished (24:21-22).

Call it God's judgment if you like, I think in some instances, it's a matter of simply getting what we deserve. It is no secret that our world is in a mess. Systems have failed and our sacred institutions are under attack and being tested. The most recent Reuters poll indicates that 58% of the people think the country is headed in the wrong direction while only 28% think we are doing just fine.

Many today feel as though they are living in a kind of Babylonian exile. We have many mountains and obstacles before us as a country—as a people. There are simply too many wide and expansive valleys separating us and keeping us apart, tribalized and fearful of each other.

Things are broken. Things seem out of control. Chaos is the order of the day. High numbers of people are claiming fatigue from the sheer number of things festering, and from the decibel level and tone of our rancor.

And the world is too fragile for this. People are too vulnerable and at risk for this—or for the principalities and powers in this world to be given blank checks that they can write out to themselves. For far too many, the world resembles the ramshackle world in the early section of Isaiah.

But the 40th chapter of Isaiah marks a distinct change. Things change. Things change because they simply cannot continue on the way they were. And the change is not hard to detect. You can hear it immediately. To a shattered people living in ruins, Isaiah proclaims,

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).

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 (40:4-5).

This beautiful, poetic imagery, resounding in hope about a people and a world reborn and made new, heralds the coming change. Gone are the destructive forces wrecking havoc on people and the society. Rendered low are those who were really only propped up in the first place—the phony kings of this world.

And lifted up are the lowly—those who are always taken advantage of, those who are always cheated out of what little might be rightly called theirs, those who can never get ahead because the deck has been stacked against them. They are lifted up, turning the world's order on its head. And in our rush to make Christmas purely warm and sentimental, we miss the real revolutionary nature of that baby's birth—that king in a manger.

And it seems to me that's exactly what we must acknowledge and celebrate this time of year—especially perhaps this year, in these days. That into a world of seemingly insurmountable mountains to climb and valleys to cross, into a world that sat in darkness beneath oppression's load, a light has indeed come to shine in our darkness, giving us hope and showing us the way. A savior has come who brought the mountains low and made the valleys high. Crooked places were straightened out and rough places were made smooth.

And in our Advent waiting and in the chaos and uncertainty of our days, we continue to keep alert, watching for the one who came and who will come again.

That's what we celebrate each year at this time. That God on high came low, and by doing so, lifted up and elevated that which needed to be redeemed and those who needed to be saved—those who needed to receive a second chance. In the eyes of God, their misery was enough of a sacrifice and their sins were now covered.

Christmas, after all, celebrates that moment when, in Christ's birth, heaven and earth touched, and God assumed our flesh and wore a human face. It celebrates that this world's insurmountable heights and unfathomable depths were neutralized—meeting each other and creating a flat smooth plain—a highway in the desert of sorts, for pilgrims and seekers and exiles and all people of God who simply want to find their way home.

That's comfort and balm for our weary souls.

Amen.