

THE PROMISE OF HOPE

Selections from Isaiah 40

Kelly Boyte Brill
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(online worship only)

I had many excellent teachers at every stage of my education, but I'm not sure I had any excellent **history** teachers. Somehow I grew up thinking of history as dry. Lots of dates to memorize, many details of battles. I still don't read a lot of just straight history, but I love certain historical fiction, the more historically accurate the better. When I read about how the events of history affected real people, I'm drawn in. I like biographies, autobiographies, books of journals and letters - I'm fascinated by how people navigate the twists and turns of life.

Over the past several months, I've been looking for stories of people who display **courage** during **challenging** times. These stories remind me that throughout history, people have faced natural disasters, the devastation of war, other pandemics, and many personal crises. I'm currently reading a memoir about Russia during the Stalin era. The book is written by a woman whose husband was arrested for — of all things, writing a poem - and sentenced to a labor camp, where he died.

In her memoirs, she describes how confused and fearful people were at the beginning of the Stalin era - confusion and fear led to distrust and withdrawal; people were **numb**. She writes about the **loss of everything familiar**. I'm still at the beginning of the book, but I'm highlighting these kinds of passages and thinking to myself, "Yes, I see that among us right now. We feel lethargic sometimes; we keep

saying to ourselves, 'Is this real? Is this really our world? The world of masks, where Thanksgiving is all but cancelled?'"

I read this history and then I shake myself back into reality. As hard as this moment is, our lives are in most ways **far easier** than people's lives in other places and in other eras. Probably everyone watching this sermon is doing so from a comfortable home; you might have a cup of coffee in your hand - there are most likely Thanksgiving leftovers in your refrigerator. The woman whose memoir I'm reading had almost no possessions. Despite their education, she and her husband lived in a one-room apartment; they frequently had no food.

Yes, our present moment is challenging - and yes, we can learn from others throughout history who have shown strength. But it's also good to gain perspective and realize that our lifestyles would be the envy of the majority of people in other eras and of people living right now in many other places.

Yesterday my brother Ed, whom some of you know, got on a plane for Anchorage, Alaska. Ed is a trainer in homeless prevention services. He has been doing most of his work remotely, but the situation in Anchorage is so dire that he felt he needed to be there in person.

There are currently 400 people sleeping on cots spaced six feet apart in the Sullivan arena, Alaska's largest entertainment venue. Several of them are people who have lost jobs during COVID, including veterans trying to live in their vehicles. Reading about their plight as our days get colder helps me put my own situation into perspective.

What if this experience, of living through a pandemic, results in us becoming more aware of our privileges? What if it makes us deeply empathetic with those whose lives are always chaotic and uncertain because of poverty or chronic health problems?

It could be life-changing, future-changing.

Our scripture for today brings us back to a time in the biblical narrative when God's people had been displaced. The Babylonian empire had ravaged Jerusalem and held much of Israel's population captive for decades. Now the people of Israel are starting the trek home, and Isaiah 40 is one piece of good news after another...let's look at this progression of four messages of hope in the passage Beau read.

The first word of Isaiah 40 is "**Comfort**". "Comfort, comfort my people!" God says. Just let that word linger in the air for a moment. God speaks a word of comfort to people who have been exiled, people who have been displaced, people who have missed the comforts of home, missed everything familiar. Comfort. It's time to come home.

This is the time of year we think about comfort. We put cozy blankets on the couch, we light candles, we wear flannel, we make fires. When we're comfortable, everything seems easier to take. The comfort God is offering is deeper, more substantial, more lasting...the comfort that comes from knowing that we are not alone, that the God of all history is with us.

The people of Israel get to come home, but how will they get there? This is the second word, "A voice calls out in the wilderness - clear a way for the Lord's road - level in the desert a highway for our God." If you've ever heard Handel's Messiah, you can't read this passage without his music echoing in your head. "Every valley will be exalted,

every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain, and all flesh will see it together.” God the comforter has become God the Road-Builder. God makes a way where before there was no way. Imagine a stretch of unpopulated desert, no roads anywhere, until suddenly there is one, and it leads right back to Jerusalem, the Holy City.

Imagine a people who felt like they were wandering in a wilderness, not knowing when they would ever return to the lives they’d once known...and not knowing what indeed those lives would be like when they did return...but those people are not alone. **We** are not alone. God is the builder of roads, the one who shows us the path, the one who walks the path before us leaving footsteps for us to follow, sometimes walking beside us, sometimes even carrying us.

This God makes a way, and this God gives us Jesus who is the way.

Jesus, who is also called the Good Shepherd, follows in the footsteps of these very scriptures, doesn’t he? He knows the 23rd psalm; he knows about shepherds; he knows this word from Isaiah, this third word of hope. “Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap. He will gently guide the nursing ewes.” You see, this God Isaiah describes isn’t just a God for people in general. This is a God who notices every sheep, this is a God who knows that some sheep need to be held and some sheep need to be guided. If one sheep is lost, this God will seek it out. It’s not enough for the people of Israel to go home, to be led home, to enjoy again the comforts of home. God’s interest in them remains, and it’s personal.

I can’t begin to tell you how often I’ve heard someone say something like this to me? “I didn’t tell you I was in the hospital because I didn’t want to bother you.” “Don’t

put my name on the prayer list; other people need the prayers more than me.” **Who are we to tell God to not notice us, we who bear the divine image?**

This is what it means to be loved by God. It means being **comforted**, it means that there is a **path** for us to follow, a way that leads us to abundant life - and it means that we have a **shepherd** who knows each one of us.

But there is still a fourth word of hope. “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. This God does not faint or grow weary; God’s understanding is unsearchable. God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even young people will faint and be weary and fall exhausted, but...**but**...those who **wait for and hope in** the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary; they will walk and not faint.”

I know how weary we all are. I don’t believe a day goes by without someone talking to me about their mental or physical fatigue. It’s hard to think straight sometimes. I describe it this way - comprehending the news every day takes a psychic toll on us. One day recently the first thing I heard was the fact that a quarter of a million people had died, in the US alone, five times the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War. What do we do with news like that? It sinks into our bodies; it wears us out. Not to mention all of the other news...

But this fourth word is again a word of hope. “Those who wait for and hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.”

Waiting and hoping: those two activities will renew us. They are the work and the call of Advent. This is a time of expectation, anticipation, readiness. In Advent, we deliberately slow ourselves down. We light one candle at a time. We pause each week and think about one aspect of God's character and God's will for us: each week, one word: first hope, then peace, then joy, then love. Slowly we prepare for Christmas, but it is the preparation of our hearts that brings us hope.

Several years ago, Richard Turner and I went to the Cleveland City Club to hear Peter Gomes speak - Gomes was at the time the chaplain at Harvard, where Richard was an alum. Peter Gomes defined hope this way: "hope is not so much a matter of will, but of **imagination** and **courage**. Advent is a great time to cultivate imagination and courage - the ability to ground ourselves, not in the belief that humans will get it right, but in the belief that God will help us live into God's own vision for humanity and all creation. Hope is a call to look **up** rather than away from the horrors of the world. We look up, not in a way to deny what is, but **to imagine what could be, and to work for that with God's help.**"

The first three words in our scripture today are all about God - God the comforter, God the road-builder, God the shepherd. The fourth word shifts to us. **Because** God will help us renew our strength, because God will supply us with energy, we have work to do.

I wish you a blessed Advent season. I pray that you let Advent awaken your imagination. This time of exile will not last forever. Imagine that we're following God, the Road-BUILDER, out of this time of anxiety and fear...where is God taking us? What kind of new world is God calling us to build together? Live in hope, for God the

shepherd is with us, offering comfort, and preparing us for a new and better future. Let us pray.

Thank you, God, for your words of comfort; thank you for being the one who shows us the Way and gives us the Way, thank you for your personal shepherding love, and thank you for renewing our strength and energy. During this blessed Advent season, even as we grieve what we're missing, remind us of the privileges we often take for granted. Awaken our imagination and help us to courageously follow you into the new day you are preparing for us. All in the name of the Christ child, whose birth we await. Amen.