

The Exile Within

Isaiah 40

What words do you give for the passage that has it all?

It's quoted in all four Gospels

10 hymns in the blue hymnal are based on this chapter.

And who can read it without hearing Handel's Messiah ring out from almost every verse?

It is a masterpiece of poetic scripture, and it's message of comfort is an oasis for the weary soul.

The book of Isaiah comes to us like a play in three acts.

The first act, chapters 1-39, finds us in Israel right before the Assyrian invasion, and is an extended warning of the judgment that will be suffered for Israel's sins.

Act one closes, curtain falls, intermission.

As the lights dim and the curtain rises for act 2 (where we start with the text today), 160 years has passed.

Israel has been taken captive by Assyria,

The Babylonian Empire rises as Assyria falls.

Babylon is being pushed out as yet *another* empire (Persia) takes control.

With Persia comes a shift in international policy that will allow the exiled

Israelites to return home.

God is at work in all of this.

Israel has paid for it's sins.

The time for judgement and condemnation is passed.

Comfort, comfort O my people!

It is time for the exiled people of God to return home.

Pastor Jon, Pastor Barbara and I talk a lot about the exile.

So much of the Old Testament is Israel processing the trauma of being forcibly removed from their homeland.

And yet I imagine that for some of you, the eyes might get a little glazy and the minds may start to wander as we pontificate on a historical event to which most of us have no emotional connection.

Some of us may have moved from one part of the country to another, giving up things that we loved, but few of us can really comprehend being forcibly uprooted and moved to a foreign land where there *is* no going back, not even to visit, because everything you ever knew and loved is *gone*.

So we kind of find ourselves stuck.

We read about this massive event in the lives of the Israelites and then we feel sheepish even trying to apply the text to our own lives.

So I want to come at this text from a bit of a different angle today. Because I don't believe that exile is a trauma that is only about place.

We have a tendency to simplify Biblical stories in our heads.

Or maybe, we just allow some of our imagery from childhood to carry over into adulthood.

Maybe we carry in our minds an image of the return from exile where every Jew, upon hearing the news, streamed from their house to join an Exodus-like caravan that sang and danced all the way back to Israel.

But remember, this is 50 years after the exile!

Yes the Jews have been away from their homeland, yes they are outsiders in a foreign empire, but dreams fade.

The human psyche is resilient. It can adapt to almost anything.
Even things it shouldn't adapt to.

I imagine that what began as heartache and never-ending tears, turned to
gritty determination to survive.
Painful memories were pushed to the back corners of the mind to give energy
to the new daily rhythms of life that inevitably come with a new setting.
The stories were shared, the sacred days were observed, but maybe less and
less as people acclimated.
The older generation died one by one, replaced by children and youth and
eventually adults, who knew nothing other than a Babylonian existence.
Israel was losing its distinctiveness.

Yes there were those who were still zealous for the scriptures and a return to
rebuild Jerusalem, but perhaps more and more there was apathy.
Maybe being a part of the empire isn't all that bad.
Maybe if given another chance to be the people of God in their own land...
Maybe we'll just stay here with what we know.

What if Isaiah is also writing to reinvigorate a people that has ceased to long
for home?

Kathleen Norris, in her book, *Acedia & Me*, traces the spiritual malady of
acedia, a term we have nearly forgotten, yet a condition that is perhaps more
relevant than ever to us today.

Acedia, often confused with depression, is essentially the inability to care.

“Not only does it make us unable to care, it takes away our ability to feel bad about that. If we can no longer weep, or desire, or feel pain and grief, well, that’s all right; we’ll settle for that, we’ll get by.”

Norris writes:

“As we languish from spiritual drought, we are often unaware of what ails us. We spend greater sums on leisure but are more tense than ever... We turn away from the daily news, complaining of “compassion fatigue,” and enroll in classes on how to breath and relax. Increasingly we need drugs in order to sleep. We are tempted to regard with reverence those dedicated souls who make themselves available “twenty four/seven” and regard silence as unproductive, solitude as irresponsible. But when distraction becomes the norm, we are in danger of becoming immunized from feeling itself. We are more likely to indulge in public spectacles of undemanding pseudo-care than address humanity’s immediate needs. Is it possible that in twenty-first-century America, acedia has come into its own? How can that be, when so few know it's name?

I can only speculate on what the Israelite psyche was like decades into it's exile in Babylon, but it wouldn't surprise me at all if the spiritual drought of acedia was a part of their reality.

And if you can't relate to having your homeland turned to rubble, the spiritual burden of acedia is likely very real in 2020.

Do you find yourself at a loss as to how to answer anymore when people ask

“How are you doing?”

Do you find it difficult to be passionate about the things that you used to get excited about?

Do you find it difficult to feel outrage or sadness about things that used to light a fire under you?

Isaiah lays out both sides of the conversation:

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.

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!"

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.

What if these words were written to a people long ago, experiencing not only
an outer, but an inner exile.

And what if these words were also written for you today?

Cynthia Jarvis reflects that:

"Honoring the repentant imperative of Advent, we might begin by naming

those corporate and personal places of exile that find us dwelling at an inconceivable remove from the God whose promises we once believed.”

Advent is a time of preparation.

It is not about getting pumped up for a naive optimism of generic holiday cheer, it is reaching deep into the biblical narrative that has stared darkness in the face, year after year, generation after generation, and continues to discover that a light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Later on in this very chapter, Isaiah will proclaim

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.

May we draw strength from these words of comfort during this incredibly challenging year.

May they propel us into the year to come.

May they release us from our cultural captivity and exile and allow us to live into the fullness of life, in all its emotions, and in doing so, may we become lights in the darkness.