

5 Epiphany
Isaiah 40:21-31

The 40th chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah contains verses that can hold their own with any of the best poetry that has been written through the ages.

Listen to some of that beautiful poetry:

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 has been 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.”

I would read the whole chapter, because it's all just that
beautiful, but let's skip to the end where we find these words.

This is part of the reading we heard today;

“...those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings
like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”

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Chapter 40 of this book is actually the first chapter of what is
known as Second Isaiah.

Differences in historical background, literary style and theological emphases make it clear that this part of the book was written by a different author from the one who wrote the first 39 chapters.

The writing of Second Isaiah originated just before the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. to the armies of King Cyrus of Persia, and during the generation that followed.

With powerful, moving imagery the author affirms the sovereignty of God and joyfully anticipates the return of exiled Judah to Palestine.

I wonder how the words of Second Isaiah would sound to the exiles and those who wait for the Lord in our own time.

I'm thinking of the Jews and and Palestinians in that Holy Land that is still torn by bloodshed and strife thousands of years after these words were written.

I'm thinking of the ones who have fled their homeland and have poured across the borders of Syria.

I'm thinking of the military families who have been separated by deployment.

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I'm thinking of parents whose teenagers have run away, or whose young children have mysteriously disappeared.

How would these words sound to ones such as these?

Would they be met with angry incredulity?

Would they be dismissed out of hand and ignored as the blathering of a dreamer who had no idea of what life in the real world is like?

That would certainly be a natural response to someone who was trying to offer comfort in a situation where comfort felt impossible, or to talk about hope at a time when hope was in precious short supply.

That's exactly the kind of situation the Babylonians found themselves in, and Second Isaiah spoke to them with words of comfort, consolation, anticipation and hope.

But these weren't the words of a pretentious, wild-eyed dreamer.

They were the words of a realist who knew something about the human condition, and who spoke eloquently and persuasively to that condition.

To be a human being means to live with tension and ambiguity.

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As much as we would love to find one, there is no stable state on this side of the Jordan River.

To be alive is to know the feelings of being exiled, uncomfortable, estranged, or in despair.

That is the human condition, and no attempts at sugar-coating can change that reality.

Second Isaiah knew that, but he still spoke a message of comfort and consolation to the Babylonians in exile.

He did that because he understood that there are two orders of being.

He knew that there is the human, historical, political, finite order, and that there is also a divine, infinite, eternal order.

This understanding made it possible for Isaiah to speak to the tension, trauma and ambiguity of the present, earthly, human order, but also to speak of the hope and promise of the divine, eternal order that lies just beyond the horizon.

As a people of faith, that is where our hearts and minds should be fixed, always on the horizon.

I have a favorite prayer that I often use at funerals.

It's a prayer that speaks about horizons.

Listen to what it says:

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“...life is eternal; and love is immortal; and death is only a horizon; and a horizon is nothing (*but*) the limit of our sight. Lift us up, that we may see further; cleanse our eyes that we may see more clearly...” and the prayer goes on.

The message of Isaiah and the words of this prayer are trying to help us understand that there is a greater reality than that which we know now.

We and everything around us will fade, wither, rot, crumble or die.

And while that's happening to us and to everything around us, we may experience happiness, fulfillment and peace, but it's also true that each of us will have to deal with a full measure of hardship and heartache.

So if that's true while we are living in this human, historical, finite order, how can the other order, the divine, eternal order be of any help to us?

We are spiritual beings, every human being is a spiritual being.

You and I have chosen to acknowledge that reality by becoming followers of Jesus, and by attempting to order our

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lives in accordance with the promises found in the Baptismal Covenant.

There are countless other ways to acknowledge that spiritual dimension of what it means to be human, but this is the one to which we have been called.

I believe this means that when we hear the words of Isaiah, or others like them, something stirs deep within us.

The divine spark within each of us is touched, and in the very depths our soul we know that even though we are living

in a finite world that is passing away, we are inextricably bound to the eternal and divine.

And so, like the Babylonians, when we hear Isaiah's words we're not annoyed.

We don't become bitter or angry.

We don't roll our eyes and think to ourselves, "What a bunch of fantasyland dribble."

We take heart.

We derive hope and encouragement from those words, and we press on, believing that by-and-by all will be well, believing that our strength will be renewed, and that we will

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mount up with wings like eagles, that we will run and not be weary, and that we will walk and not faint.

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light; Look favorably on your whole creation, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by

him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus
Christ our Lord. Amen.

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