

Waiting in Exile

A sermon delivered by Wendell Griffen, Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Ark., on December 4, 2011.

Isaiah 40:1-11

40 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 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.

3 A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 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.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

6 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.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

9 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!'
10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
11 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.

Mark 1:1-3

1 The beginning of the good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,*
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ',

To be exiled is to be banished or expelled from one's native country or residence by some power or authority and forbidden to return. Sometimes people are exiled for a limited period. In other cases people may be exiled for life.

Sometimes people are exiled because of natural disaster—as in the exile of people from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. People are also exiled due to political conflict. Many Cubans living in South Florida came to the United States as political exiles after Fidel Castro came to power. Many Palestinians have been forced from their homeland across the years by land settlement policies and political oppression in Israel. Jews became exiles from Eastern Europe after Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini came to power in Germany and Italy before World War II. Native Americans in North America became exiles on reservations

when politicians and land speculators forced them from cherished hunting, fishing, and burial places.

In any event, exile always involves a separation from one's homeland, friends, and cherished experiences. Being exiled is always painful. The passages from Isaiah 40 and Mark 1 that we've read on this second Sunday of the 2011 Advent Season are based on the experiences of people familiar with exile.

Isaiah 40 is written from the perspective of Judah's exile in Babylon for almost 150 years. The people had been away from home long enough for elders to die who had been children in Judah when the exile began. Some people openly questioned whether they would ever return home. Would they die in Babylon? Would their descendants be forever strangers from their homeland?

Their anguish is answered in Isaiah 40. *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* [Is. 40:1-2]. The prophet senses a divine prompting to proclaim comfort to people waiting in exile.

Hundreds of years later, the descendants of the people who were exiled in Babylon are living in Palestine again. But they aren't truly home. They live in their homeland, but under Roman power. They are political exiles in their own country. Their situation is the perspective through which Mark's gospel introduces us to the life of Jesus from the ministry of John the Baptizer. The "good news" (gospel) concerning Jesus Christ ascribed to Mark begins with John the Baptizer preaching to people living in domestic exile.

We are exiles! The subversive truth and harsh reality concerning the human situation is that we are exiles from God, our true home. We are not "at home" with ourselves, but often find ourselves in oppressive relationships in families, on jobs, and in society. We're often not at "home" even in the houses we've chosen, on the jobs we've sacrificed to get and keep, and in the relationships we've struggled to develop and maintain. We're exiles.

We long to find a way back to God because we sense we belong with God. Somehow we understand that we aren't living as we should. We aren't who we desire to be. We're going through the motions. We're surviving the best we can. We long to be "home," but we've been away from where we belong so long that

we can't find the way back. Or perhaps we've accumulated so much baggage that we can't imagine picking up and trying to find our way back to God. We're exiles.

Time with its "swift transition" has forced changes we can't reverse. We're forced to accept changes to our health, income, independence, and other things because "we aren't what we used to be." People age and find themselves "exiles" in their own bodies. As people live longer, many seniors find themselves "exiles" from the homes they worked to own, the families they struggled to support, and the friends, sights, and sounds they long enjoyed.

Waiting is the experience for exiles. Exiles wait. They wait for the opportunity to return home. They wait for a power or force to break through that's stronger than the power and force that banished them from their home country. They wait for clues that exile is ending. Exiles wait and wonder—whether aloud or silently—when they will go home.

And as the time of exile lengthens one begins to fear that one won't ever get home. That leads to feelings of abandonment. Perhaps we've been forgotten. There are so many obstacles separating us from returning home. No one seems willing to help us. It seems that we aren't worth helping.

So, we wait for some glimmer of light into the darkness of our exile. We wait for some evidence that the exile will end, that we will be delivered, and that we can find ourselves home again. People wait for some evidence that they'll be delivered from loneliness, sickness, abandonment, oppression, violence, and from waiting itself. Waiting is what people do in exile, even as we seem to go about the necessary routines of life.

God has a word to us—to the exiles. Isaiah 40 and Mark 1 remind us that God understands our experiences as exiles. God has a message for us. It is a comforting message delivered by prophets and heralds to exiles of all sorts and in every situation and setting.

Exiles are God's people. *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.* No matter who we are or where we've been banished, we're God's people.

- Incarcerated people are God's people.
- Seniors living in isolation are God's people.

- Political refugees are God's people.
- People living with their backs against the wall due to poverty, discrimination, and other oppression are God's people.
- People who've been banished from their faith communities because they are trying to live with integrity concerning their sexual orientation and identity are God's people.
- Immigrants are God's people.
- Sinful humanity—each and all of us—are God's people.

Although we're away from home, we aren't away from God's heart. We aren't outside God's concern. We aren't second-class with God. We're God's people.

Exiles are to be encouraged. The messages from Isaiah 40 and Mark 1 affirm God's determination to encourage the exiles.

- Exile will not endure forever, but will end!
- God is coming to deliver us.
- Prepare to be delivered. *A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*
- God will not be stopped from delivering the exiles. *Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.* This is the original "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."[\[1\]](#) Nothing will stop God from bringing us back. No barriers will hold God back (symbolized by mountain, hill, and valley). No inequities in our experience will hold God back (*the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain*). God will get to us and God will get us back home!
- And we will experience God's glory together! *Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. **God backs up the promise of our return. We'll be delivered from exile because God says so, no matter what other powers say, think, or do.***

God involves us in preparing to return home even as we wait in exile. Even in exile, God sends heralds of good tidings. Even in exile, God commissions people to "lift up your voice with strength." In exile, God sends people to boldly (*lift it up, do not fear*) say to our exiled brothers and sisters (*the cities of Judah*), "God is coming!"

- God is coming with might to overcome the forces that hold us.
- God is coming with justice to vindicate those who suffer.
- God is coming to rule in righteousness.
- God is coming like a shepherd to gather us, feed us, carry us when we can't go on, and lead us home.

That's what Mark's gospel says John the Baptizer was doing. John was God's herald for Jesus. John was preaching to prepare for the Savior. John came talking about Jesus and said that when Jesus came, he would introduce us to the liberating fact and force of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus prepared the way for the Holy Spirit.

Yes, all humanity is like grass. Yes, we are fragile and feeble beings. Yes, we spend our days swiftly and pass away. But that doesn't mean we are doomed to exile. There's a Power beyond the forces that hold us hostage. God calls us alongside God—Holiness calling fallen yet redeemed humanity alongside—to do a wonderful thing. God chooses to enlist us, despite our exiled situation and feeble nature, in the great work of calling and bringing exiles home.

Our task is to prepare to make the world right for God to turn it into a righteous home. God will deliver the world from its hostage condition. God will set the captives free. God will bring the prodigal children home. God will send heralds of truth, grace, peace, joy, hope, and justice to confront every mountain and hill and valley and every rough and crooked situation and system that keep humanity and the creation living in exile. Our mission is to be prophetic heralds to people living in exile.

In God's name, let's prepare our time and place to experience the glory of God. In God's name, let's show that God still has heralds of good tidings who aren't afraid to lift our voices and say God is coming for us! God is coming to rule for us! God is coming to care for us! God is coming to be with us! God is coming to end our waiting. God is coming to end our exile. God is coming to bring us home—to God. Amen.

[\[1\]](#) "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" was a popular rhythm and blues hit single first released in 1967 on the Motown/Tamla record label and performed by Marvin Gaye and Tammy Terrell. The song was written by Nicholas Ashford and Valerie Simpson. It was later recorded by Diana Ross and was the first number 1

hit of her solo singing career after she left the Supremes.