

To the Heart

This morning's text places us right in the thick of exile, in the midst of despair. Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. The Temple—the tangible center of the people's worship and identity has been destroyed. The bulk of Jerusalem's citizens have been uprooted and sent to live in a foreign land. The Isaiah we meet this morning is known as Second Isaiah or Isaiah of the Exile. This later Isaiah is believed to be one of the exiles himself. He has spent his entire existence surrounded by unfamiliar practices and people and tempted by any number of gods to worship. He has never lived in the land of his ancestors. He has heard stories from the glory days of his great-great-great-great grandparents, the gilded moments of David's and Solomon's reigns—they must sound like fairytales. He has also heard the stories of his great-grandparents' lives in Jerusalem, the times when a different day meant a different ruler, the times when the Temple's crumbling walls mirrored the collapse of the kingdom itself.

Our text today comes from the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah. It marks a decisive shift in tone from what comes before. Many scholars hear this text as the call of a new Isaiah, an Isaiah for a new generation, a generation in exile. [Read Isaiah 40:1-11]

Comfort, comfort. I imagine that many of you are now singing Handel's *Messiah* in your heads. I've been humming the hymn all week. The people who first receive these words from Isaiah do not sing them. My hunch is that they can hardly bring themselves to hear them. You see they know the stories. They have heard about the warnings issued in the words of the other prophets, that God's justice was coming, that their ancestors' fickleness and unfaithfulness would result in devastating results. And they were right. But as Jeremiah insisted in the words we read last week, that was not and is not the end of the story.

I'm guessing you heard about the attack on London Bridge late last month. Unfortunately, the act of random violence is just one in a string of so many these days it can be hard to keep them straight. The bad news tends to blur together, and the good news can be hard to hear. A colleague, Jan Edmiston pointed out that it was the mention of a narwhal tusk that caught her attention. She says she had thought narwhals were mythical

creatures, which I confess I did, too, until sometime in the last year. So the narwhal tusk caught her attention, but it was James Ford's story that held it. Ford is a convicted murderer who was attending a conference on prisoner rehabilitation on a day pass. He was one of the bystanders who ran toward the attacker, and now his story has become more complicated. He is no longer just a killer. Yes, he is guilty of murdering a woman over 15 years ago, and he is one of the people who saved lives by stopping the attacker. He will no longer be known only for the worst thing he has done.¹

And that is the truth that Isaiah is trying to proclaim to the people of Israel and Judah. Their time as exiles is coming to an end. Nothing will erase the sins of their ancestors, **and** nothing will erase God's love for them. We need to be clear. Isaiah's discussion of the people's time in exile is not suggesting that God is one who vindictively punishes willy nilly. God does not send hurricanes because of a particular piece of legislation. God does not cause an earthquake because of whom someone loves. That said, there are real consequences for failing to live as God intends. It is not about adhering to a strict code of dos and don'ts. It is instead about a call to faithfulness, a call to a people to live out the covenant of justice and right relationship with God and neighbor. So, through the voice of Isaiah, the people reflect on what brought them to this point. Prophets had warned their ancestors that it was unwise to place their faith in gods they could mold and grasp and that it was unfaithful to follow leaders who promised an easy way out. God has remained faithful. The people have not. God knows their flaws, their failings and their fickle ways, AND God is faithful. Yes, there are consequences when we turn our backs on God and God's commands to worship only God, to keep the Sabbath for ourselves and others, to care for the poor and the stranger. And there is grace, consolation, and comfort, even. And yet then and now, such grace can be difficult to hear and to embrace. The exiles are homesick for a life they can barely imagine and heartsick for a new beginning, but they do not believe they deserve it. And they probably don't. We tend to identify ourselves and others with the worst thing we have done, the worst thing they have done. We have a hard time getting our heads around the fact that God does not.

And that is why I think that God—through Isaiah—chooses to speak to their hearts instead. That is one way to translate the language of “speaking tenderly.” God is calling for someone (or someones, really, all y'all)

¹ Jan Edmiston, <https://achurchforstarvingartists.blog/2019/12/04/about-that-narwhal-tusk>

to comfort the people, to extend compassion to the exiles, to these ones who feel forgotten, punished, shunned, and left behind. And God calls the comforters to “speak to the heart.” Because it is the heart that needs to take in the good news of grace, restoration, and forgiveness, isn’t it? I can tell you that you are forgiven until I am blue in the face, but until you can absorb the good news into your heart, you will never fully believe it. Because it is easier to believe that we are forgotten, disappointing, worthless, and that we are defined by the worst we have done than it is to hear that we are forgiven, to hear that there is life after exile, to trust that the Lord of all can still find a way to love us and lead us home.

Today marked our third consecutive Sunday with a baptism. While I would love nothing more than to keep that trend going, maybe it is good that we don’t do a baptism every Sunday, because we might grow too accustomed to them. We might begin to yawn and think there is very little new for us in the splashing of the water and the words of promise and new life. Maybe we already do. My friend and colleague Jessica Tate tells a story about a woman in her former congregation named Gracie. Jessica writes:

Gracie [had become] a Christian just a year and a half [earlier]. She grew up without a faith tradition, found her way in to practicing Buddhism and ended up at our church because she wanted community for her kids and she was curious. She shared with the congregation her first experience in worship. ‘We got to the part in the service when the minister says, “In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven,” and I thought to myself, “Can this really be true? Can it really be true?” I looked around and people didn’t seem to be have heard. It was like they had forgotten that this was the best news they would ever, ever hear.’²

Somehow this good news had spoken to Gracie’s heart as well as her head. For those of us who sit in these pews every week or only a few times a year, this love and grace and forgiveness is never old news, but somehow our hearts forget. And I suspect the exiles have all but forgotten, too, because for so long they have carried the conviction that their ancestors had let God down, that they had been unfaithful, that they would forever be identified with the worst their people had done. But Isaiah sings a different tune; baptism tells a different story. We are forgiven; Judah is redeemed, not because we do anything to deserve it, but because God

² Jessica Tate from her paper on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, for The Well 2012

chooses to offer forgiveness, to work redemption. We are no longer exiled; we are on our way home with God, the very one who has been our God all along.

Baby Nik will be known for a lot of things as he grows up. He will be remembered for his amazing chubby cheeks and his sweet baby disposition, but there will be other things, too. Maybe he will be strong, wise, talented, or kind. Maybe he will fly into space or write the great American novel. But he will not be perfect. He will be hurt and, yes, this sweet cherub will even hurt others along the way. He will mess up and make mistakes, but my hope and prayer is that he will know in his heart that those mistakes and mess ups are not what ultimately define him. He is not now and never should be known by the worst thing he does. And if he ever starts to think somehow that he is only that worst thing, I hope there is a community, a voice around him to speak comfort again to his heart, to remind him that he is beloved always. And I hope he lets his heart believe it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.