

# The Greatness of God

## Isaiah 40:1-11

The holiday season can be a difficult time for many of us – we may have experienced loss during this time of year or experience despair and sadness because someone dear is missing from our festive table. But there is hope when we think of the greatness of God and how God continues to comfort us in our times of difficulty.

Our scripture gives us *Ecstatic Words for the Fearful and Despairing*. Disasters make people numb, afraid, and hopeless. Disasters undermine faith in God and in traditions that once presented the world as orderly and secure. In the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy, and deported leading citizens to Babylon; and occupied the land for fifty years. The exquisite poetry of this prophet (Isa. 40-55) emerged in the decades after the invasion like a healing, life-creating song. It sought to bring back to life a people crushed under a shroud of death. The writer of this portion of Isaiah probably wrote among the deportees and was concerned with their interests, but he imagined a nation restored, a city rebuilt, and a people reunited in Zion.

Today's reading (Isa. 40:1-11) introduces major themes of the book and stands in sharp contrast to the interpretation of the Babylonian disaster presented by other biblical books. Jeremiah and Ezekiel generally accused the people of causing the catastrophe by rampant sinfulness, but Isaiah shifted the conversation in a radically different direction. He put aside blaming and accusing speech, bursting out, instead, in lyric poetry of comfort, hope, and joy. This passage creates a place for a fearful people, not in the destroyed temple, the collapsed monarchy, or the broken

covenant of the past, but in God's never-failing word. At a time when other tangible and intangible ways of relating to God had collapsed, the prophetic word was their anchor. Though everything else fails, God's word endures forever, and that God comes to lead them home.

The passage gives: words of comfort (vv. 1-2); words of preparation (vv. 3-5); words about the word (vv. 6-8); and words of the herald (vv. 9-11).

***Words of Comfort (vv. 1-2)***. For a grieving, futureless people, few words could be more surprising than Isaiah's first words, "Comfort, comfort my people." The divine command to comfort responded directly to the unmet yearnings of personified Jerusalem depicted in the book of Lamentations. There the destroyed city, known as daughter Zion, cried out for comfort and for God to notice her suffering (Lam. 1:2, 9, 16, 21). There God remained silent, but our scripture opens with the longed-for consoling speech. Jerusalem had suffered "double for all her sins." Zion's suffering appeared massively disproportionate to anything she may have done. For Isaiah, the people's sin did not adequately explain the historical disaster. He reinterpreted the past, argued with other interpreters, and with imaginative daring challenges the status quo of blame and despair.

Then he gave ***Words of Preparation (vv. 3-5)***. Unidentified voices obey the divine command to comfort Zion (vv. 3-5 and 6-8). The first voice calls out urgent instructions; be at the ready; prepare now, for the king is coming. Smooth out the highway, flatten the mountains, raise up the valleys, make the way clear for a speedy arrival: the "glory of the LORD (YHWH) shall appear." To that abandoned, battered community who supposed God had left them or had been defeated by stronger Babylonian gods, Isaiah announced that God approached on the highway they were preparing; reliable words because "the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (v. 5).

Then the writer gave *Words about the Word* (vv. 6-8). The second comforting voice hammers home the utter reliability of the divine word (vv. 6-8). "Call out!" a voice said. "What shall I call out?" someone replied. Flesh, grass, and flowers fade and wither; everything perishes, but "the word of our God will stand forever" (v. 8). The prophet assured them of the steady, durable, and reliable foreverness of the divine word.

Then he gave *Words of the Herald* (vv. 9-11). A commanding voice commissioned a herald to climb to a high mountain. She must go up high to project her voice far and wide as she proclaimed the good news, the message of joy. The unnamed speaker urged her to cry out fearlessly. But what is fearful about her task? Are her words too improbable to be believed by the cities of Judah to whom she is to proclaim it? Are they too hard to speak fearlessly about Judah's new life during Babylonian occupation? Is her joyful news too world-reversing even to be imagined?

Three times the prophet-poet repeated the attention-grabbing word "Behold," or "Look": "Look, your God! Look, your God comes with strength...! Look, your God's reward is with him, his recompense before him!" Like any self-respecting king in the ancient world, the herald's God came with gifts for the people. But the shock was that this God came at all and that this God was and is not weak, powerless, or ineffectual. The God proclaimed by Isaiah comes in strength with arms stretched out in triumph; but not the strength of a bloody avenger, a violent brute, or a demanding judge. No, this God's strength appears in the barely thinkable power of gentleness, in tender and caring presence, in intimacy such as a shepherd expresses when gathering the wounded, scattered flock. This God draws together the scattered lambs of Judah and rebuilds Zion. This God speaks with them in this fertile, life-producing word that, once spoken, accomplishes that for which it is sent (Isa 55:11). **Kathleen M. O'Connor**

For those of us who live in the midst of exile, cultural collapse, and communal disaster, our own personal times of hopelessness, there can be no true hope except in God. It is futile to hope in individuals or even in the strength of the community, for human beings are inconstant, are fickle, and break their promises. Eventually they wither and fade, not simply because they are mortal, but because they are untrustworthy. The only one who can be trusted to make right what is so badly wrong, who can lead Judah out of exile and into the promised land, is the one whose Word will alone "stand forever" (v. 8). Judah can hope because God is present, but Judah is not yet at home in Zion. Hope, therefore, must live in the tension between the Word that is present and the promise which is not yet, but is coming. **George W. Stroup**

To those whose ears are not tuned to this divine teaching, the message is preposterous. It seems clear to some that this God being touted has been defeated by the stronger god of the reigning empire. How is one to take seriously the claim that this God will appear in glory?

Take a look at our own world, and see how preposterous the message we carry will sound. It does indeed seem that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ has very little power in relation to the other "gods" that seem to reign in our "empire." Consumerism demands more of our resources, and lust for oil and mobility threatens our environment. The conduct of war robs us of precious lives and international respect. Religious zealotry pits one image of God against another, leaving the human community fractured and cynical. How dare we speak of this God who promises to become present in a way that "all people shall see it together" (v. 5)?

That is precisely what the faithful people of God are being commissioned to do. In the face of derision and indifference, we are to speak of this God whose fierce

compassion and care for humankind trumps the power of the other "gods" who seem to enjoy sovereignty in human relationships.

Advent is a time for us to hear the promises spoken or sung to the community of faith once again and then sit with them through the season. It is also a time for our community to find its own voice, overcome its objections, and speak words of comfort and assurance to anyone who feels separated or abandoned by God that God *will* arrive and *will* come in gentle power. **Richard F. Ward**

The God we worship is great and his love endures forever. This is our message to the world!

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