

The Prophetic Work of the Church in a Bleak Time
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11, 28-31

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Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God 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.
Is. 40:1, 28ab, 31

The church now has a chance to be a prophet to our times. We tend to assume that the work of a prophet is limited to making pronouncements and issuing calls to action with regard to issues of social justice. United Church of Christ theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann teaches us otherwise. Brueggemann says that a prophet is a poet who helps people imagine a world other than the one describe by the dominant narrative of society.

Isaiah functioned in just that way. He is one of the greatest prophets in Old Testament history. The dominant narrative of his day was one of national emergency. His people were apprehensive, fearful, and uncertain. Without denying any of the facts he saw on the ground, Isaiah described a different world, a spiritual world, a world just as real, powerful, and pervasive as the one before peoples' eyes.

We can do this very work of describing a different world now. God means for us to do it. The dominant narrative tells of the facts now on the ground, and those facts tell not only of the pandemic but also of the recalcitrant political in-fighting that seems just as viral as the disease the world is fighting. Our opportunity – and call from God – as a church is to interject another note and tell of another world. Society is quite hungry to hear about it, I believe, and we are uniquely situated to help people imagine its reality.

To gather a sense of what our message can be, we can apprentice ourselves to that great prophet Isaiah, and particularly to one of his greatest chapters, Isaiah 40. What Isaiah said then we can say now and be used by God to lead to stability in an unstable time.

We can help people imagine the comfort of God.

Isaiah 40 has a Genesis-like quality about it at its opening. Genesis 1, you remember, opens with nothingness; there is nothing there but a vast ocean of chaos. While the chaos churns there is suddenly a voice from outside of it. It is the voice of God saying, "Let there be light."

Isaiah 40 opens with a different kind of chaos. It has as its background the apprehension, fear, and uncertainty of Isaiah's time. No one knows what is going to happen to themselves personally. No one knows in those days of national emergency what is going to become of the future of the nation, of the economy, or of religion. While that chaos churns, there is suddenly, as if from nowhere – but we learn it comes from heaven – that says, "Comfort my people." God is so insistent that people be comforted that the word is repeated. "Comfort, O comfort my people."

God wants that anxious, apprehensive, upended people to know they are not alone, they are not forgotten. God wants them to know – and Isaiah proclaims it – that they are loved tenderly by one who gathers, feeds, leads, and even carries them when necessary.

We can speak of the same God at work today in the same way. People are already seeing it, I think, but they may not realize it is God who is at work. People are seeing neighbors helping neighbors. They are seeing people check in with one another. They are seeing people look out for one another. They are seeing people helping one another. We are finding in these days that we need each other and that we actually do have each other, and it is wonderful. We can name this, rightly, as an outward and visible sign of God's inward and spiritual comfort at work. The world is not lost in this exile; God is here, comforting us.

We can help people imagine the strength of God.

Isaiah 40 has Isaiah 6 behind it. (Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 40 may be from two different authors, but we do not have to tend to those details just now; in any case, the two chapters are held together for us in the same book.) Isaiah 6 is where we find the prophet's vision of God within the temple. That vision came at a time of national emergency, for it happened when the king had died, leading to political transition. It was during that national emergency that Isaiah saw, in the temple, a vision of God. That vision showed God to be so magnificent, so glorious, that the massive temple was able to hold only the hem of God's robe. God is that splendid.

Isaiah 40 does not talk about the hem of God's robe, but the largeness of God runs straight through it. God is one who levels mountains, lifts valleys, and straightens the crooked places. God is greater than the nations, bigger than the sky, and wholly unequalled. God – all this is in Isaiah 40 – God is energetic, untiring, and knowing with a knowledge that is unsearchable.

We have it within us to help people to imagine this strong and capable God now. This is no time to tell of a tired little God is old and dainty and fussy and trapped in traditions that don't touch the present day or its generation. This is a time to recapture the message of the bigness of God, the God made known in Jesus, the one whom the winds and waves obeyed, the one from whom the demons retreated, and the one whom the grave could not hold and death could not stop. It is time to tell of the God who is bigger than this virus, bigger than the recalcitrant political bickering, and bigger than the economy. It is time we tell of the God who's "got the whole in his hands." Can we prove this God? No. But we can tell about this God, and God will act and God will make himself known.

We can help people imagine the change that can come about through God.

Isaiah 40 speaks to people in exile and tells them that life can be different, that they do not need to stay the way they are. He doesn't speak, I don't think, at least not right here, of changing the conditions of the exile; but he speaks rather of changing the people who are in exile. And all the metaphors Isaiah uses to describe this inner change are energetic: those who had fallen will fly, those who had wearied will run, and those who had fainted will walk.

Now we have just that promise to make to people today. Ours is no foolish promise that the pandemic will be over by Easter or Pentecost or Mother's Day or whatever holiday you

choose to name. Ours isn't a promise that changes the condition we are in, but it is a promise that reconditions us for the condition we are in. The promise is spoken in a hymn:

New strength comes night or day when from the heart we say,
may Jesus Christ be praised!

It is a promise that matches the final soaring words of Isaiah 40. It is a promise that says you do not have to stay the way you are. Wait upon the Lord, look to God in faith, and in God the fatigued will find rest, the stressed will find peace, and the fearful will find calm for in God even the dead find life. I do not know when the economy will open, but you can open this hope now and start trading on it today. You can be changed for the better through God.

Well, the dominant narrative around us is as it is. It is gloom and doom and sickness and solemnity. Let's not deny that. We need to heed all the warnings. But – and this is the point – let us put something otherwise right alongside it. Let us help people imagine the reality of the comfort of God, the strength of God, and the renewing change that is possible through God.

Before you try to help anyone else imagine that, be sure to put this message inside your own soul first. Imagine the comfort of God around you. Imagine the strength of God above and beneath you. Imagine the divine change that is possible in you. Then look for opportunities to work this truth of God into the conversations you have, the emails you send, to Facebook posts you make, and the home-schooling you do. Along the way God will use you as a prophet to the nation, as one who helps people imagine the truth of the spiritual realm and who helps stabilize lives in need of hope.