

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.

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.”

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.

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

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

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!”

See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

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.

The ancient city of Babylon must have been spectacular. Built at the edge of the hard-baked Syrian desert, about sixty miles south of today's Baghdad, Babylon was the most famous city in Mesopotamia. Hebrew scripture refers to Babylon in Genesis, and later in the books of Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah.

The Assyrian Empire that conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and scattered the ten tribes had also conquered Babylon and ruled over them for nearly 600 years. Eventually, despite appearing to be omnipotent and eternal, the Assyrian Empire, like all self-serving empires, collapsed. Babylon rose to become the next superpower of the ancient world.

By the time of this reading from Second Isaiah, six centuries before Christ, the Babylonians had rebuilt the city straddling the Euphrates river that the ancient historians described as surpassing in splendor any city in the known world. There in one of the hottest climates on earth, King Nebuchadnezzar II built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The story is that the king had married a Persian woman to formalize the alliance of the Babylonian Empire with the ancient Persian Median dynasty. Nebuchadnezzar's wife, Amyitis, was homesick for the mountains and meadows of her homeland. And so, to comfort his wife, the king built a lush artificial mountain of astonishing size and beauty using sophisticated technology and engineering to irrigate the rooftop gardens.

What a guy!

Well, not long after launching the construction of this astonishing and comforting garden for his bride, the king began another project. He invaded the southern kingdom of Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. Eventually, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, King David's majestic city and collected its treasures, pillaging, plundering and raping as they went. They leveled the walls of the city and demolished the magnificent Temple of Solomon.

The Babylonians left Jerusalem in a pile of rubble. And that's not all. Never let it be said that the Babylonians didn't appreciate talent, education and cheap labor. They rounded up the cream of Jerusalem and Judah's people – their civic and religious leaders, their scholars, architects and elders. Then the conquering Babylonians marched these folks, along with a

few of their family members, north and then east through the desert wilderness back to Babylon.

Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar's sympathy for homesick people didn't extend beyond his immediate family. Because the Babylonians kept the Judeans captive for nearly seventy years. The Jews in captivity, for their part, had children and grandchildren, and through it all, they maintained their Jewish identity. They maintained and enhanced their relationship with YHWH, even as they hoped and prayed for a return to Jerusalem.

Before they were taken captive and the walls of Jerusalem fell, the Judean Jews must surely have trusted that God would keep the city safe. As the Babylonian raiders poured over the broken stones, the Jews assumed that God would protect the Temple or at least the Holy of Holies, the innermost and most sacred area of the Temple. And yet, the Babylonians destroyed it all – their place of worship, their homes, the source of their comfort.

And as the Babylonian soldiers forced them to trudge across the desert, a people once again displaced, some of the Jews must surely have wondered whether God had finally abandoned and forsaken them once and for all. Imagine the sense of desolation and the temptation to despair. This outcome just did not make sense.

This morning, thousands of people in Southern California are waiting and watching as everything they have in this world is going up in flames, just as other families did in Northern California last October. Or like the hundreds of Puerto Ricans who lost everything to Hurricane Maria or folks in nearby Dominica whose homes and basic infrastructure may be beyond repair.

This morning, there are people in the pews of St. Elizabeth praying for family and friends who are feeling the pull of despair in the face of these disasters or similar circumstances. People are praying for folks faced with losing their property or their livelihood. Or worse still, their hope.

King County has the third largest population in the nation of people dealing with homelessness. Last week, I took another bagful of socks to the good folks at Operation Nightwatch along with some new shoes. I heard stories about people who had come looking for shelter wearing only wet

socks. Right here in our own neighborhood, people live waiting, waiting to be relieved, waiting to be restored, waiting for something better.

Now, to some degree, we all know what it feels like to lose control of some part of our lives. To experience pain and loss. We know what it can feel like to wait for good news. To wait for a diagnosis that we hope will mean better health. To wait for the answer to a job interview that might lead to a better life. To wait for a shift in a companion that could give us a better relationship. Waiting for something better.

American culture doesn't value waiting very highly. Our tendency is to pressure each other to get over whatever is lost or broken, and just move on. But if people are living in a world of fear, they are more likely to "move on" with more hostility and aggression than people who have found ways to wait with hope that soothes fear.

Simone Weil was raised in an agnostic French family of Jewish descent. At the age of 23, she converted to Christianity. She began having encounters with the Divine described as desolate ecstasies or amazed agony. For her entire life, Weil suffered from illness and frailty and yet, almost as if she were responding to Peter's letter to the churches in Asia Minor, she wrote this: "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

The author of Second Isaiah also wrote from a place of suffering. Captive in Babylon, he wrote to Jews waiting in expectation after decades of separation and anxiety. And yet, his poem is almost relentlessly upbeat, opening with a messenger who rejects tragedy in the name of hope. The good tidings are these: YHWH has won, Babylon has lost, and Judah is free.

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." This is a command from God to all the company of heaven. The people's hope and loyalty has not been for nothing. They have not been forgotten. YHWH has chosen comfort for the people and nothing can prevent their deliverance.

And what's more, the return home will not involve another forty years crossing the desert. Rather than following the Euphrates north, then west across the desert before turning south again, a voice from the heavenly council authorizes the creation of a direct road west, a road leveled through

the undulating wadis and made straight from Babylon to Jerusalem; a direct road home.

Isaiah does not promise that all suffering will cease. His good news of restoration does not deny or change the brokenness of the human condition. Isaiah's song of hope does imply that some of us may be called, like John the Baptizer, to deliver a message that others may find hard to grasp. Much like Isaiah's poem, the beginning of the good tidings of Jesus the Anointed is a reassurance of the hope granted to people waiting patiently in expectation.

We are not waiting for more time or a better space or other people. The 17th century German mystic Angelus Silesius described Advent as the time for each of us to birth the holy in the middle of our lives, wherever we find ourselves. "I must be the Virgin," Silesius wrote, "and give birth to God, should I ever be graced divine beatitude." We wait, in other words, to give birth the holy in our own lives.

That's what Advent is about.

We wait with patient expectation for the God who has already come. We gather at this table to say thank you for what has already been planted within us and among us. We provide a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. This is a place, as Karl Rahner once wrote, "where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us."

Advent is our reminder that God still sends comfort into our short and frail lives. Our reminder that there is something Divine growing within us that frees us to live in this world without being seduced by despair or lostness or fear. "That," Rahner wrote, "that is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment."

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