

Holy Highways in the Deserts of Life

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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Isaiah 40:1–11

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

“Comfort” ... this passage begins:

“comfort” as a command,
and “comfort” as a promise;

“comfort” as what we as directed by God are to do,
and also,

before and during and after,
“comfort” as what *God*
has done,
is doing,
will do.

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.”

But not comfort as in “making comfy.” Not giving ease to those already at ease. Not, I tell you,

fresh mints on nicely fluffed pillows,
lighted candles with soothing fragrances,
a mug of hot chocolate on a wintry day.

No, not that kind of comfort.

Instead, the comfort in our scripture passage is greater, deeper, more earnest, more effective than those kinds. It’s more like what the word “help” can mean:

help in the midst of hurt,
strong aid for those in need,
assistance — effective and decisive — for those in dire straights.

When someone is widowed, the cards and the meals and the unasked-for shoveling of the driveway and the able explaining of finances are a *comfort* to the bereaved.

When the floods come, or the forest fires, the able and talented help of builders and electricians and firefighters and medical professionals are a huge *comfort* to those whose homes have been battered and whose lives have been upended.

Almost two years ago, when I was at the hospital about to have surgery, and YiFen Lee came to pray with me and Tammi, she was a *comfort* to me and my wife.

During Matt's time in prison, the visits and packages and prayers have served to *comfort* him greatly.

Some things are meant to comfort, but don't quite. Some people try to comfort, but they don't really, their efforts falling a bit short.

They offer platitudes.
They encourage self-pity,
or even engage in it themselves.
They're all talk, no listen.

But comfort here, as commanded and promised by God, moves all such failures of comfort offstage and out of the way.

The notion of "comfort" in these verses also says something about those who receive the comfort. Those who are to be comforted are truly in need of it.

They are the weak, the despondent, the suffering.

Not the strong. Not the powerful. Not those on top of the world, at the pinnacle of success.

Not those who always are attended to and celebrated and pampered by our culture, but those who are not, those who are typically, usually, despised and abandoned: these are the ones who are to be comforted.

Those who first heard these words, those for whom they were first written, were in exile. Where they lived was not their home. They were resident aliens in a country strange to them. They had lost everything they once had: houses, land, temple, palaces, nation. They had lost their dignity. To the people of Judah, this was the meaning of "exile."

And even though they had suffered victimization in being wrenched into exile, they were not only victims. The whole book of Isaiah, including these words before us today, reflect a profound and difficult theological wrestling with what their exile meant. And the message of Isaiah, in short, linked exile to sin. Their profound loss was a consequence of their betrayal of faith in God, of their failure to live as the people God had made them to be.

In these verses, though, the message is brighter. It's now about a new chapter, one of restoration, of return from exile.

*"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."*

Now the declaration will go out:

*"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*

The wilderness was a great barren expanse lying between Babylon and Jerusalem. It was a region difficult to traverse. Right outside of the massive city of Babylon, there were these great highways from all sides leading into the city, built for the grand processions of kings. (Wealthy and powerful nations have always liked showing off.) But when one got some ways

out from the city, the roads got smaller, and rougher, and at times ended altogether. Travel through that region was difficult, even dangerous.

And that's just the physical difficulty. The political obstacles were even greater. The people of Judah, the children of the covenant, the descendants of Abraham, they were in exile. They were not home. And what had been home no longer existed. If they were to leave, their captors would have to let them go — but how could that happen? And once they got back to Judah, they'd have to rebuild everything — how could that happen?

So the wilderness felt to the people like a massive obstacle standing in their way, reinforcing the feeling that their exile was permanent and that they would die in this place where they did not belong.

*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.*

And yet, God is telling them that it's in the wilderness where a highway would be made, the way of the Lord would be prepared, where "every valley shall be lifted up," rough places smoothed over, tall obstacles leveled.

And this smoothing

and straightening
and leveling
and highway building

means a stunning transformation of the world that goes beyond what human strength is able to accomplish.

This ... is *miracle*, the work of God. As miracle,

it doesn't need human effort to be real;
it functions in its own way and in its own categories;
it creates its own possibilities and its own actuality.

But it also invites human effort, calls it forth, even commands it, having people, having *us*, participate in it and add our labor to it,

not to make it better,
not to make it complete,
not to make it real,

but just because, just to highlight the loveliness that is already there — which is, actually, often what happens in a miracle.

And because the highway-making is God's work, this makes it a *holy* highway through the desert, so that

the exile may return home,
the captive may be set free,
the suffering may be restored to health,
the broken may be made whole,

all of these, not just the strong and able, but even the weakest being led back by the holy One who has built that holy highway, who like a shepherd will not only show the way but even will carry tiny lambs in his arms and help along those mother sheep that about ready to give birth.

*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.*

Yes, for the exiles, who see before them a great desert,
separating them from their truest home,
dividing “is” and “ought,”
standing in the way between reality and promise.

God makes through that desert a holy highway, and leads the people along it.
And so God does for us, too.



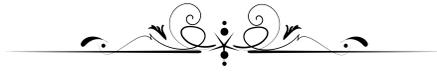
Of course, it might go too far to say that we are exiles, when there are literal exiles this very day living in makeshift housing far from their homes, people like the Rohingya forced from Burma, or the many Syrians who have fled the civil war in their country.

And yet so many of us experience something like a spiritual exile, and we know something of the spiritual desert.

We feel the disconnect between who we are and who we pretend to be. We sense that conflict between the ideal and the real. Even as we try to push it to the side, we are haunted with the awful sense that the world around us is corrupt, and, even more awful, that we are complicit in its corruption.

We experience each day the great cultural and political conflict that marks our era, and even as it makes us sick, or sad, or mad, we don't know what to do with it. So we stuff it, or we change the channel, or we take sides with even greater passion. Yet all responses feel less satisfying than we had expected, leaving us still with that yearning, that desert feeling of exile.

And many of us also see the gap between the size and stature and influence of the church of our youth and what the church is today, not only this church but many churches, most churches in this country. We feel this, too, as a kind of exile, one marked by the decline of the church from its place of privilege and status fifty years ago to a place of irrelevance (for many) today. We respond to this in typical, even predictable ways, by assigning blame, or by doing the same exact things we did many years ago. At times, we double down on activities and strategies that clearly don't work and even drive people away in disgust. Rarely do we ask ourselves the deep, probing, questions that would lead us to repent, to follow the Good Shepherd out of exile along the highway he's made for us in the deserts of our lives.



The way of Jesus, my friends, is a highway prepared in and through the desert regions of life.

It's not where things are already comfortable that Jesus most typically makes himself known. It's not in the spiritually leafy and beautiful times of your life that his comfort is most powerfully shown. It's not to those who've got it all together, who are on top of their game, who've arrived, that Jesus is most eager to be the Good Shepherd.

To the lost, in their wandering.

To the doubters, in their doubting.

To the wounded, in their pain.

To the victims, in their shame and in their rage.

To the poor, in their poverty.

To all of these, to all of us, Jesus, in whom we truly see the strong tenderness and the fierce comfort of God,

 makes a way in our life-deserts,

 invites us to follow,

 calls us to repent,

 beckons us to drop both pretense and shame,

 and in all that leads us out of exile to our truest home.

May we hear his call, and let us follow.