

Isaiah 40:1-5

- 1 Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
- 2 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.
- 3 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 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.
- 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Introduction

Today we would normally celebrate Thanksgiving with a typical message being about things that we are thankful for. However, this year is a little bit different. Due to the pandemic there is no group singing which means we will not be having a cantata this year. What we can have is special singing from individuals singing solos. The first Sunday of Advent is next Sunday. One of our local favorites Smokey Wilson has agreed to sing for us during advent and the only Sunday he has available is next Sunday. Therefore, today I will give the first Advent message.

The background of today's message goes all the way back to the eve of the conquest of Canaan. Many times it is written in the Torah that the Promised Land is theirs to keep. However, they only get to keep it if they keep covenant. All they have to do in order to keep all of the vast resources is to keep covenant with God. They get the land through an easy conquest against superior forces. They settle in the land and time passes and God sees that they are not keeping their end of the covenant; they are not living up to their end of the deal. So, God sends messengers - several prophets - to warn the people to keep the covenant and only worship the one true God. Many prophets warn the people that they are not to have false gods but only worship the one and only God. It is so simple. All they have to do in order to keep all of the vast resources of prime, green, fertile land is to obey the commandments and have no idols. But the people do not listen. As simple and as easy as it is, they do not listen even though they have the scriptures. They have the Torah where the covenant is promised and the demand to keep the covenant is evident. The promise is repeated over and over again in the scriptures and the warning is repeated over and over again. Still, the people do not listen.

Then we get to the history Ancient Mesopotamia where there is an extremely advanced and industrious society. They invented the wheel and achieved important developments in mathematics, medicine, and architecture. Due to this developmental advantage their army was advanced and victorious. They would plunder the losing nations and gain their valuables, metals, animals, and land. This increases the size and wealth of the empire and provides valuable resources that are needed for a well trained army. It has a compounding effect of expansion and wealth accumulation. The more they get the more they are able to get. In order to keep expanding the empire and its wealth, military campaigns overtake regions and gain more resources. The superior battle skills and military might secures the wealth and Assyria becomes the greatest empire. The Assyrian king ruled the land and became ruthless and bloodthirsty.

In 722 BC Assyria invaded Israel and captured Samaria. They captured the ten northern tribes of Israel, burned down the cities, slaughtered the population, and tortured the people. In time the vast empire became more than they could control. The wealthy people became more concerned with their own wealth than with Assyria's welfare. Over a period of roughly a century, the balance of power shifted. The Medes, which is now Iran, join forces with the Chaldeans, which is now Iraq and the Babylon empire conquers Assyria, which is now northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. Then Babylon regained control of the entire region and in 605 BC they invaded Judea and deported many Hebrew people to Babylon.

The era of prophecy in the Bible occurs before the exile, during the exile, and after the exile. Isaiah is one of many prophets of the exile. Each prophet is different some are rich and some are poor, some are eccentric and some are scholarly, some are poetic and some are dramatic. However, they all have one thing in common; they are all devoted to God, and they all communicate the will of God to the people of God. During a time of great political and spiritual upheaval, Isaiah repeatedly warned against looking for safety in armies and alliances with other nations. It is God; it is the one true God, the God of the nation of Israel that will protect the nation. Kings ignored Isaiah and as a consequence there was destruction and the exile. During the darkest of time comes a message of hope.

Our Scripture for today is part of that promise of hope. God used the prophets to deliver the word of God to the people of God. The word that the prophets deliver is a reminder of the covenant, a warning of the consequences of breaking covenant with God, and a word of hope. God's people know that the word coming from the prophets is the true word. All of the prophets of God have one thing in common - to deliver the word of God to the people of God. In the middle of all of the gloom and doom is a word of hope. Comfort God's people, the penalty of their transgression has been paid. This is tremendous hope for them indicating an end to captivity and a return to God's promise. And a voice cries out "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord ... the glory of the LORD will be revealed, everyone will see it, for God has spoken.