

Isaiah 40:1-11 Pastor Bill Uetricht 12/04/11 2 Advent

I don't know about you but for me one of the most irritating things about life is discovering that what I had thought all along about life is no longer adequate for dealing with the life I know now. That's really disturbing. I mean, for so long my viewpoints have given direction for my life, helped me understand life and people, even have given meaning to my life. And then, something happens or life happens, and I am forced to think differently. That really is irritating.

For much of my adult life and certainly all of my life as a pastor I have been a part of the segment of Christianity that has wanted to get the church to think differently about sin. I have been a part of the segment of Christianity that is aware that the church has beaten up people and beaten them down with its jaded perspective on sin. As many of you know, I have been a grace-centered guy. I told my wife at one point that if anyone ever places a stone on my grave I want it to read: "He believed in grace."

Now I haven't changed that belief, but lately, because of some experiences in my own personal life, some reading I have been doing, and some occurrences in our current culture, I am beginning to think maybe I have downplayed sin too much. Oh, it's not that I want to beat people up or that I feel we should tear people down, make them feel ashamed of themselves, inject within them shame and guilt that they can never get rid of. No, that is not my desire. But I suspect that my and our downplaying of sin has served sometimes served only to reproduce more sin. The fact that we haven't named it has enabled it to go on and sometimes get bigger. And what's more, sometimes the downplaying of sin has meant that we have run from the truth. "Sin"

sometimes speaks the truth. Our lives *are* messed up. And sometimes *we* have made them so.

Both our first lesson from Isaiah and our gospel lesson from Mark start with sin. The reading from Mark begins with the rabble-rousing, camel-hair wearing, locust-eating John the Baptist, who is calling for repentance from sin. Mark tells us that “John appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.” John’s baptism was for the sake of repentance, so that people might turn from their sins, might live different lives. John’s message begins with sin.

Isaiah, too, starts with sin, starts with the recognition of the sin that has brought Israel into exile. But in this case, the author of this portion of the second portion of Isaiah indicates that God has had enough of dealing with his people on the basis of their sin. “Comfort, O comfort my people,” says God to the prophet. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem!” Why? Because God has grown weary of dealing with people on the basis of their sin. The message is that the exile of Israel is now over. “Tell her,” God says, “that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has [experienced more than enough of the consequences of her sin.]”

It’s quite clear. It’s not that sin isn’t real. It’s not that sin shouldn’t be named. It’s not that sin isn’t the truth. It’s not that we are not messed up. It’s not that our families aren’t dysfunctional. It’s not that we aren’t incredibly self centered. It’s not that we don’t make some dumb choices. It’s not that life is not an amazing coming together of bad choices *and* bad situations—things we have control over and things we don’t.

I am always intrigued at the way the Bible depicts the problems that the people of God get into. Sometimes the Biblical writers say that those problems are the fault of the people who haven't followed the way of God. Some of the prophets said that about the exile into Babylon. Israel's lack of faithfulness caused them to have to leave their homeland. Sometimes, on the other hand, the Biblical writers indicate that the problems come from somebody or something else. The slavery in Egypt was caused by *somebody else*—the Egyptians and their big boss Pharaoh. And sometimes, it seems, that the Biblical writers indicate that the problems are a result of a combination of both bad choices *and* bad situations.

This, I would argue, is the nature of sin. Sin is all of this. Sin is the mess. Sometimes the mess comes from us, and sometimes the mess comes from other people or from life's cruelty or its randomness. And yet sometimes it comes from a combination of both. This is reality. This is truth. And we must not downplay the truth; we cannot run from it. And running from it is not the message of Christianity.

Yet, hear this and hear it loudly and clearly. "Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God." God has had enough of dealing with people on the basis of their very real sin. Oh, it's not that your mess isn't messy. It's that there is something bigger than the mess. Your mess is not the final word. God has had enough of dealing with people on the basis of the mess. God is up to something new. God is giving a fresh start. The God of grace and forgiveness is on his way. So get ready. Prepare the way. Make straight in the desert of your lives a highway for your God. The God of fresh starts is coming. The mountains of your lives need to be flattened. The valleys need to be lifted up. The uneven spots need to become level, and the rough places need to become a

plain. God who is bigger than your ups and your downs, caused by your choices and your situations, is on his way.

Make a way for him. Make a way for one whose word, whose promises, whose actions are much more reliable than your sin, much more dependable than the choices and the situations that oppress you. Let's face it. "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field." Let's face it. Life is brittle. Who we are and what we do soon deteriorates and disappears. Let's face it. We aren't forever. Let's face it. Neither are the situations and the people who oppress us. They come, and they go. That really is the message in our first lesson from Isaiah to the exiles of Israel. Those oppressive Babylonians—they come and they go. They are like the grass that withers and fades. Your sin, your choices and your situations—they will come and go. Your sin is not forever. The only thing that is forever is the word of our God—a word and an action of promise and hope, a word and an action of forgiveness and grace.

So, get you up out of your pew, get you up off of your couch, get you up to a high mountain and say to others—others who are just as entangled in sin as you are—"Here is your God!" Here is the strong God who is so gentle, who feeds his sheep like a shepherd! Here is the God who gathers hurting, broken, and sinful people into his arms! Here is the God who carries them next to his heart. Here is the God who cares especially for the deeply fragile sheep.

Sin is really real. We can't run from it. There's no reason to downplay it. But hear a word of comfort, my people. It's not the final word. Prepare the way for the final word. The God whose final word is grace and forgiveness is on his way. In a few weeks, we will hold and rock this word in our arms and in our hearts as this word becomes one

of us, cries like all of us, and eventually will die like all of us. “Behold, he comes” lying in a manger, dying on a cross, loving people whose lives sometimes are a real mess.