

*Isaiah 40:1-11 4O comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak 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.*

*3A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4Every 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. 5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.*

*9Get 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!" 10See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11He 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.*

Years ago I lived near the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation. Rocks everywhere – hilly – poor soil – when the Sioux Indians were herded together they were exiled to this place. And though in later years no army patrolled to keep them there, and the government payments were certainly not making them wealthy, they stayed. Even as life on the reservation was blessing no one so many stayed. They were used to reservation life. In time their exile became not so much an exile to a place as being trapped by hopelessness, despair.

A child dies and a parent is suddenly in exile. Though the rooms of the house are the same, they are no longer a home. Though friends are the same they are suddenly strangers and laughter and joy and peace all belong to a distant land.

Exile – the death of one you love – a job lost – a marriage failing – illness – pain – a hurt that you are not able to forgive – there so many ways that you may be driven into exile. Will you know when the time to return home has come – will you be able to return from exile?

When the Babylonians conquered the land of Judah most all the people were forced to leave their home. The best and the brightest – leaders – merchants – priests – farmers – were forced to leave everything behind and to live in exile in Babylon. Away from the holy city Jerusalem, away from the temple which the Babylonians destroyed, away from the fields and vineyards and hillsides they had known

as home. For fifty years they lived in exile until Babylon was defeated and they could return home. The first lesson today was written just before this time of return.

“‘Comfort, 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.’”

God’s anger for all the sins of the people was satisfied - like a parent who has banished the offending child to his room. Now comes the word that the punishment is over.

“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.’”

This was an announcement to the people in exile: The Lord will provide a way back home: not some twisting narrow road for the most courageous, nor some faint path which only the skilled will follow but a broad highway for everyone to return. Now is the day. Return!

But then comes this word within our text: “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.’”

When you have been in exile your heart loses hope. Once you believed you could know joy with this person but now love has grown cold. Too many times he has failed you. The exile is in here, in a soul that cries that people are just grass – green one moment then brown and dry and dead the next. How can you open your heart up again only to have it sucked dry by another hot wind?

But then comes this word: “The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever.” Dare the exiles believe it? Will they journey home only to have some other army come

through smashing their children and crushing tomorrow? Will you give your heart to him once more only to find he is unfaithful? Or that she will die like your first wife did?

They tell me that many, even most of those who were exiles in Babylon, never left. They came to believe in exile more than the Lord. And how many of those you have known and I have known have stayed in exile – given up – no longer believed that God could bring an exile home again.

Today I am Isaiah. The Lord gives me orders to comfort the Lord's people – to comfort you. In the one John announced the Lord provides you a way home. From every loss and exile the one born of Mary is the way home. Though there be no more spirit left in you he will place his Holy Spirit in you. He will feed you like a shepherd, gather you in his arms, and gently lead you. Will you follow?

Here is your God – a piece of bread – a drop of wine – his whole life entering you. His life in you will be greater than every loss or sorrow – greater than death for his life in you is life eternal.

Here is your God small and weak in Mary's arms – broken, dying on the cross – so like me and you. And though the world will see him as just another blade of grass flourishing for a season the Lord has made him forever green.

He will bring you home – from whatever places you have been left and lost – he will bring you home. Today in him you can return home – start all over – be alive once more.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.