

Isaiah 40:1-11 40Comfort, 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.

Babylon. Land of Exile. In 586 BC Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took the people of Judah captive – deporting the leaders of the people to captivity in Babylon. Forty-eight years later when Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon he allowed the captives to return home. Some made the journey back to the ashes of Jerusalem. Many, most, gave up their heritage as God's people. A whole new generation had been born and raised in Babylon. Babylon had been the only home they had known. They were lost to God's people when they remained in Babylon.

Just prior to Cyrus' victory over Babylon, God sent a prophet to speak to God's people in Babylon. The message of this prophet makes up the 40th through the 55th chapters of the book of Isaiah. Today's first lesson is the introduction to the message of this prophet. "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." Then a voice cries: "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."

Can you see it? A whole people moving through the wilderness from Babylon to Jerusalem - a highway for God. Mountains flattened – valleys raised - a way for God to lead God's people home. But what does any of this have to do with us?

If I were a wife who had a husband in Iraq this Christmas I would hear this prophecy – this promise – and wonder – Could God flatten the mountains of insurgency – raise up the valleys of chaos and disorder and bring our troops home?

If I were a mother whose son was trapped in the Babylon of illegal drug usage I might wonder, “Can God bring my son through the desert of withdrawal, home again to sobriety and clear thinking?”

If I were a child whose parents are on the verge of divorce I might be praying, “God, deliver my family from the Babylon of conflict. Flatten those mountains of anger, lift those valleys of resentment, bring my family home to love and forgiveness.”

But this wife and this mother and this child have been praying a long time; their loved ones are still trapped in Babylon. The prophet knew what that was like: Listen: “A voice says, ‘Cry!’” And I say, ‘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 war goes on – a son keeps using – parents keep fighting. Even if God is providing a way home no one is taking it.

But the prophet has something more to say, “The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.” Maybe you can not count on people – on things changing with people – but you can count on God.

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Sometimes I think that my life would be great if people would change and problems would go away and every body I love was happy. But in a world where people die and have minds of their own even when those dreams come true the peace is momentary – fleeting - everything in place for a moment but in the next instant everything moves

and nothing is in place. For me that kind of thinking is a Babylon of its own. I can live in the captivity of wanting the world to be the way I want it to be. And it never will be.

But the word of God will stand forever. So I will take the prophet's place today and say to you: "Here is your God. See the Lord God come 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 and gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.

Hope for you and for me will not come through the world being changed - nor through the people we love being changed - but peace and joy and hope are ours when we are being shepherded by God.

Ages after the prophet wrote God filled his word full in sending a descendant of the shepherd king - a descendant of David - who gathers the lambs in his arms and carries us in his heart. Jesus is his name. He leads you through every desert, every wilderness, bringing you out of every Babylon. Jesus is God's comfort for God's suffering people, forgiving all our sins. He brings you home.