

SERMON

Rev Dr. Sam Wells

Egypt and Babylon, the Old Testament is shaped around these two stories. Slavery in Egypt is not Israel's fault, but the time in Babylon is self-inflicted sorrow, grief that Israel brought on itself by turning aside from God's ways. I wonder how that embarrassment and discomfort touches you. I wonder if there's a suffering and pain in your life that need not have been, because it was self-inflicted. It may have been a very visible place, like Babylon was for Israel. Perhaps, you know what it means to face public humiliation, or it may be a secret known only to you, or perhaps one or two others. Maybe you feel angry, or paralysed that you have to live your life with this secret weighing you down.

Hear these words of Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." I want to look closely at what these words might mean for you today. Israel has four reasons to find God's dazzling new Word hard to credit, four obstacles to accepting God's comfort.

Here's obstacle one. When you've made a mess of things, when you've sinned big time, there's a lot of hurt, but there's also damage. Damage refers to the lasting practical effects of what you've broken. For Israel, the hurt was its estrangement from God. The damage was the fact that it was in Babylon, 500 miles from home. But God says, "Cry to Jerusalem that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." In other words, her sin is forgiven, and its consequences are healed. That's the difference between forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness deals with the sin, but after the sin is forgiven, there's still the damage to be faced. Healing addresses the damage, and it sometimes takes a whole lot longer.

Now, for obstacle two. "We're 30 days' journey from home, and in between are mountains, valleys, and all sorts of difficult terrain." God says, "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." Don't worry about the road back. You're going home on a six-lane highway to Zion.

So to obstacle three, the flesh is weak. We say, "I just haven't got it in me to face the future. I'm tired. The grass withers, the flower fades. I'm like the grass." But see how this obstacle is dismantled like the previous ones. "The grass withers, the flower fades. But the Word of our God will stand forever." You don't have to do this alone. You're going to do this in God's strength. "You shall mount up with wings like eagles, you shall walk, and not faint".

Then obstacle four, fear. Here, we're in for a big surprise. "Behold your God." We're face to face with God. God is mighty, has overcome our weakness, flattened the mountains and valleys, and repaired the damage we've done. But it turns out God's really a shepherd, who loves us sheep. God doesn't drive us faster than we can go, and when the going's too much for us, God says, "Let me gather you into my arms, and carry you in my bosom."

Behold your God. This is a body coming back to life, first, mineral rocks, valleys, rough ground, then vegetable, grass, and flowers, finally, animals, sheep, and lambs. There's an ecological coming alive here. The animal, vegetable, and mineral world is coming out of exile too. There's a political coming alive here. Israel is emerging from half a century of obscurity and subjugation. And there's a personal coming alive here, as we've just been exploring. Israel's alienation from God has ecological, political, and personal dimensions and consequences. God resolves these consequences in an ecological, political, and personal way. This is resurrection. When Jesus appears in Galilee, John the Baptist says all these promises are about to come true. Jesus is about to bring Israel back to life. God the Father is saying to God the Son, "Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid."

That's how God announces to Israel that her exile is over. And that's how God is announcing the same news to you this Advent today. Comfort ye, you have served your term. Your penalty is paid. God is making a straight way for you. You may feel like grass in the wind, but you will be borne up like an eagle on the wings of God's Spirit. God will lead you like a shepherd, and say, "Let me carry you in my heart." Don't stay in exile anymore. God doesn't want you there. Here is your God, speaking tenderly to you.