

I Believe in the Sun: Hope for Tomorrow

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 29, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Isaiah 40:1-11](#)

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“Comfort, comfort my people!” says your God. Says *your* God.

Seven decades earlier, the holy city of Jerusalem suffered a siege at hands of the Babylonian army. Eventually, it fell. The leaders of the Hebrew people, the people of wealth and the people of political and religious power were dragged off to Babylon. For seven decades, their descendants and their descendants’ descendants lived in exile. For seven decades they had been separated from the land they believed that God had promised to them.

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” the Psalmist asked. Living among the Babylonians and their religious systems, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, wondered how they could stay faithful. And now, after seven decades of exile, the Prophet Isaiah speaks this word to his people: “Comfort, comfort my people!” This is what *your* God says to *you*. This is the message God has for you in the midst of this struggle, in the midst of the pain of separation, in the midst of exile: Comfort.

God tells Isaiah to speak compassionately to the exiled people, the people of Jerusalem. The message God has for these people, the message of comfort, is that their compulsory service is coming to an end. The exile is soon over. These *are* words of comfort.

These past nearly-nine months have felt like a sort of exile to me. Exile, after all, is a place or a state of not belonging, and while I am still in Fremont and still pastoring a church I love, the pandemic state of things has made me feel as if I do not belong. I don’t pretend for a moment that the sense of exile I feel is anything like the oppression and suppression suffered by the Hebrews in exile in Babylon: Generation after generation of anger, guilt, and powerlessness. Generation after generation of despair. That is how I imagined they experienced the Babylonian exile. Nine months versus 70 years. Still, suffering is not a contest, and I, too, welcome these words of comfort from the Prophet.

The Prophet speaks not only words of comfort. The Prophet also speaks words of forgiveness. And I find, in the combination of comfort and forgiveness, a sense of hope growing within me. Author Peter Prince says, “For God’s people a new story is in the making. ‘All humanity will see it together.’ The apparent powerlessness of God during the exile will be transformed; ‘here is your God!’ is the recognition of reclaimed sovereignty. People once afraid now speak fearlessly. It is a time for action. Exiles must embrace faith in God, discern their true political situation, and choose to act. ‘Prepare.... Make a straight way for God.’ The power of God’s Word must have its say in history.”¹

¹ Peter B. Prince, “Signs of Belonging,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/signs-belonging> (accessed 28 November 2020).

Some of you probably recognized John the Baptist in this passage from Isaiah. Some of you heard John's voice crying out in the wilderness, calling the people (just like Isaiah) to clear the way for God. I would much rather Isaiah, and I would much rather John simply declare that a level highway in the wilderness for God will appear. That is not what either of them says. They call us to action. They call us to build a road, a highway.

A couple years ago, Diana Butler Bass published a Twitter thread about highways. It's easy, she said, to spiritualize this passage. It's easy to think of our hearts as the wilderness in which we need to construct a highway for God. She points out, however, that highways and roads are tools of imperial power. "When Isaiah first wrote these words, he was surely thinking about Babylonian roads – the Babylonians built roads through the wilderness for festive processions to their gods. Not exactly something the Hebrew people approved of."²

Consider, too, what it took to build roads. "Rulers had to send out huge contingents of servants, peasants, slaves and conquered people to build roads. Digging, leveling, rising, laying beds, moving rocks and stones."³

By the time of Jesus, the empire was Roman, not Babylonian. The Romans were famous road builders. Well, technically, their enslaved and conquered people were the builders. The empire directed the construction. And the empire directed the construction so they could move their armies and collect their taxes.

I wondered why Isaiah (and John the Baptist after him) focused on building a road. "You didn't really want a road," Bass pointed out. "if you got a road, that meant you'd been taken over. You were in the empire. And that road symbolized the power they had and how much they could take from you."⁴

"Build a road," Isaiah calls. "Build a road," John echoes. I wonder if they were heard, at least at first, to sound like imperial overseers. Or were they heard, as they intended, to be speaking words of rebellion, words of sedition – that is, words of liberation?

"*This* road doesn't bring oppression. It doesn't bring a festive procession to foreign gods. It doesn't bring the army, the tax collector, or Caesar himself. *This* road brings the healing of the nations, the long-expected Immanuel, God-with-Us, the lion and the lamb!

"Build *this* road. Not because you are enslaved to build it, not because this is the road that holds us in slavery. But *this* road – the road we build through the desert [is the one] on which the God of Love will come and free us all....

"Stop preparing *that* way. Stop building Caesar's road. That's the wrong way. The imperial road leads to death. Always. It is the way of slavery, built by forced labor to force us all into a life of oppression.

² Diana Butler Bass, in a Twitter thread that begins with <https://twitter.com/dianabutlerbass/status/1071778325503328256> (published and accessed 9 December 2018).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

“Build the other road. And it isn’t just a road in your heart. It is a real road. A political road. The road of liberation. Through this world.

“Freely embrace this task to free the nations. To prepare the way for God's love and justice.”⁵

What I’m learning (or perhaps relearning) as I reflect on this passage is that hope is not passive. Hope is a choice. Hope is built. And sometimes building hope is hard work, as hard as building a highway in the desert.

There is a documentary that came out eight years ago called *Defiant Requiem*. I intended to watch it over the Thanksgiving weekend but didn’t get to it. Maybe tonight. The film tells a story of intellectual and artistic courage that built hope. During World War II, in the Terezín Concentration Camp, a young Czech conductor (he’d been arrested and sent to Terezín in 1941) helped his fellow prisoners build courage and hope through music. His most extraordinary act was to recruit 150 prisoners and teach them Verdi’s *Requiem* by rote in a dank cellar using a single score, after grueling days of forced labor. The *Requiem* was performed on 16 occasions for fellow prisoners. The last, most infamous performance occurred on June 23, 1944, before high-ranking SS officers from Berlin and representatives of the International Red Cross.

[Watch the trailer at <https://youtu.be/dgimWmMqav4>]

Imagine what it would have been like to be a prisoner of the Nazis singing in front of SS officers lyrics like, “Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awful day, When the heavens and the earth shall be moved: When you will come to judge the world by fire.” One unified voice crying out, “Clear the Lord’s way in the desert!”

May we who have the energy to build God’s highway in the wilderness proclaim a word of comfort to those who are struggling. In a time of deep angst and despair for so many of us, in a time of significant loss over a sustained period, may we find the tools we need to build hope for tomorrow through this encouraging word: “Behold your God.” Amen.

⁵ *Ibid.* (Italics added – because Twitter doesn’t do italics.)