

# Expository Articles

## *An Exposition of Isaiah 40:1-11*

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## *Isaiah 40:1-11*

ONCE AGAIN during this Advent season, audiences the world over will hear words from our text as they have been set to music in Handel's *Messiah*. The oratorio opens with 40:1-5 and continues a bit later with settings of 40:9 and 11. The music catches the mood of these texts in a magnificent way. As Luther wrote, ". . . here the prophet is the most joyful of all, fairly dancing with promises."<sup>1</sup>

These words will also be heard from lecterns and pulpits during Advent. The new Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Protestant Episcopal and Lutheran lectionaries all assign the text to the Second Sunday in Advent (the first two omitting verses 6-8). All of these link the Isaiah reading with Mark 1:1-8 and II Peter 3:8-14, thus intending that preaching should move from the Isaiah text to the New Testament account of John the Baptist and then of the final Day of the Lord.

This essay will suggest moving from our pericope in a different direction. We shall focus on 40:6-8, note how this section is picked up in First Peter, and then suggest a way of relating the text to another side of the lectionary tradition and to our own time.

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1. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, *Luther's Works*, vol. 17 (Saint Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1972), p. 3.

I

The preaching of Isaiah 40—55 is addressed to a people who had been deported from their homeland and resettled as exiles in Babylon. Something of their mood can be caught by listening to the words of the poets and prophets who lived among them. When the temple was put to the torch by the Babylonian armies, questions of “How long?” and “Why?” went up to heaven along with the smoke and the flames (Psalm 74:7-11). This was a time for weeping, not for singing (Psalm 137:1, 4). Ezekiel moved among the deported as a pastor, listening to them complain that God was not fair (Ezek. 18:2, 25). The prophet whom we call “Second Isaiah” tells us that his people believed God had forsaken them (Isa. 40:27; 49:14). Clearly the political crisis of the exile had produced a theological crisis as well!<sup>2</sup>

In this situation, a man was called to preach. Like the prophets before him, he gives us an account of his call. Since our understanding of the text differs from that of the Revised Standard Version, we offer here a translation of Isaiah 40:6-8:<sup>3</sup>

A voice was saying, “Preach!”  
And I said, “What shall I preach?  
All flesh is grass  
and all its beauty is like a flower of the field.  
The grass has withered, the flower has wilted,  
because the breath of the LORD has blown upon it.  
Surely the people is grass!”  
“The grass has withered, the flower has wilted,  
but the word of our God will stand for ever!”

What voice did the prophet hear? Similar voices are reported giving commands in the plural to “prepare” (3) and to “comfort” (1).

The clue to understanding these mysterious voices lies in recognizing that behind this text is the notion of the council of Yahweh or the divine assembly.<sup>4</sup> The picture is of Yahweh seated upon his throne, surrounded by heavenly beings who worship and serve him. True prophets are those who can see and hear what

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2. Cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1972<sup>2</sup>), pp. 347ff.

3. The verb *qr'*, here translated “preach,” is often used to denote that which a prophet proclaims in public: Isa. 58:1; Jer. 2:2; Jonah 1:2; 3:4; Zech. 1:14, 17. For the understanding of the text as a dialogue between the “voice” and the prophet, see Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, trans. by David M. G. Stalker (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1969), pp. 31-46.

4. For a recent discussion see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 186-90.

is happening in Yahweh's council (I Kings 22:19ff.; Isa. 6:1ff.; Jer. 23:18). Against this background the sense of our text is as follows: The prophet hears an angelic voice delivering a message from God to other angelic beings (1f.). Then he hears an angelic voice commanding other heavenly beings to prepare the way of the Lord (3-5). The voice addressing Jerusalem in 9-11 may be that of a heavenly being, though it seems more likely that the speaker in this case is the prophet himself.

In any case, the voice commanding "Preach!" to the prophet, is that of an angelic messenger from God himself. But the prophet was reluctant. The best days of his people are past, he believes. They did enjoy a brief time of glory, but now have been scattered like dried-up grass. And this has come as a result of the action of God himself!

But the heavenly voice told him that here was something of permanence in this world where everything withers and wilts. "The word of our God will stand for ever!" And somehow this transformed the pessimist into a preacher! He had stood in Yahweh's council and heard the news that the exile would soon be over and that his people's sins were forgiven (1-2). He had heard the orders given to prepare a highway in the wilderness so that the exiles could return (3-4). And he called on Jerusalem herself to announce the good news that God was about to bring his people home (9-11). This was no less than a word from God, a word which would stand forever (8) and which had the power to cause a withered and perishing people to blossom and flourish once again (cf. Isa. 55:10f.).

## II

The First Letter of Peter is also addressed to a people living in exile, away from their homeland. This time the writer is in "Babylon," apparently using that symbol of exile to refer to his own residence in Rome (cf. Rev. 17f.). As he writes to Christians scattered about northern Asia Minor (1:1), he refers to them in terms used to describe the People of God in the Old Testament:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,  
a holy nation, God's own people. . . .  
Once you were no people but now you are  
God's people; . . . (2:9f.)

These are a new people of God! They also are acquainted with trials (1:6) and the "fiery ordeal" (4:12). They are suffering along with brother Christians throughout the world (5:9) and are called "exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1).

But now as we examine the way in which the author uses the term "exile,"

we see that it has become something other than a political concept. Life on this earth can be described as “the time of your exile” (1:17). In fact, Christians are really “strangers and refugees in this world” (2:11, TEV), where they meet anxiety, adversity, and suffering (5:7-10). Thus “exile” has become a theological concept used to describe the life of a people who are “aliens” on this earth, living away from their real homeland in heaven.

But how could the apostle preach words of hope to this people? Like the prophet before him, he knew that all things in this world are perishable, even silver and gold (1:7, 18). But he also knew that the word of the Lord abides for ever. He quotes the statement from the prophet and then makes an astonishing comment on that text: “That word is the good news which was preached to you” (1:23-25). Here is the clue to his preaching of optimism and hope.

Animated by this kind of theology, the apostle tells his audience that they can look forward to an inheritance in heaven which is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1:3-5). In the meantime, they ought to rejoice (1:3-12), show love to one another (4:8), and cast their anxieties upon God (5:7). For things have been revealed to them that even angels longed to understand (1:10-12).

### III

But now, what shall *I* preach? How can I redirect the words of these ancient texts so that they become words from God to the people with whom I live and work?

If preaching is going to be relevant, it has to be directed to questions raised by people of our time. We can not afford the luxury of providing answers to questions no one is really asking, even if those answers are correct ones! I know of no contemporary author who has been able to articulate the deep questions of our time with the power of Elie Wiesel. His book *Night* tells the story of his boyhood, when he was taken from a little village in Hungary to the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He describes a day when a young boy and two adults were hanged in the camp:

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. . . . The three victims mounted together onto the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. “Long live liberty!” cried the two adults. But the child was silent. “Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York, Discus Books/Published by Avon, 1969), pp. 75f.

Yet another picture from Wiesel. He tells of the beadle of a small synagogue in Eastern Europe, who would rush to the synagogue each morning before the services began and shout, "I have come to inform you, Master of the Universe, that we are here." The Jews began to be massacred, but he would still rush into the synagogue and cry at the top of his voice, "You see Lord, we are still here."

After the last massacre, he found himself all alone in the deserted synagogue. The last living Jew, he climbed the bimah one last time, stared at the Ark and whispered with infinite gentleness: "You see? I am still here." He stopped briefly before continuing in his sad, almost toneless voice: "But You, where are You?"<sup>6</sup>

These questions, "Where is God? Where are You?" arise from those who find themselves far from God, living in a kind of theological exile. But one does not have to go through a Holocaust to experience this. A death, a domestic tragedy, an illness, can put one into a situation where his deepest prayer may be one which he scarcely dares utter: "God, I am still here. But You, where are You?" The psalm which many of the lectionaries assign to this Second Advent Sunday also voices this sense of separation from God: "Wilt thou be angry with us forever" (Psalm 85:5)?

What shall I preach to the theological exiles of our time? When the prophet asked his question, the angelic voice gave him an answer which provided not only a "what" but also a "why." What to preach? The word, the promises of God. But why preach at all? Because the word of our God will endure forever! Given this assurance, the prophet began to preach good news with such power that when the first Christians sought a vocabulary to describe the significance of the Christ event of their time, they could only pick up this language from Second Isaiah.<sup>7</sup> "The word of our God will stand forever." This sounds almost like a motto designed to inspire a weary preacher of that Word, and to keep him going. Said Luther, ". . . this statement might well be formed in large words and engraved on the sleeves."<sup>8</sup>

The apostle takes us a step further. He is very much aware of the transitory nature of "all flesh," as his contrasts between the "perishable" and "imperishable" indicate (1:4, 7, 18, 23). He repeats the prophet's assertion that the word of the Lord will abide forever, and then identifies that word as the good news about

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6. Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York, Bard Books/Published by Avon, 1972), pp. 90f.

7. Cf. the remarks of W. D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament* (Garden City, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 147-52.

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 13. This line from Isa. 40:8 has an interesting history as a motto. At the time of the Reformation, the evangelicals supported Luther by displaying the initials of the Latin text over their doorways and on their jackets, see *Luther's Works*, vol. 49 (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1972), p. 155. These initials continue to appear on the jackets of students at the college where I teach, since *Verbum Dei Manet Aeternum* is the college motto, and the initials are found on the college seal.

Jesus Christ. Then he goes on to express that good news to the “exiles” of his time with such power that his short letter has become the classic expression of Christian hope.

Prophet and apostle together suggest images for preaching that Gospel. Did the prophet envision deliverance for those languishing in Babylon (Isa. 40:3-5)? The apostle announces that the New Exodus has taken place, with Christ as the sacrificial lamb setting men free from the bondage of emptiness and futility (I Peter 1:18f.). Did the prophet speak of the Lord caring for his own like a shepherd (Isa. 40:11)? The apostle declares that “the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” has appeared, and is none other than the risen Christ (I Peter 2:25; 5:4; cf. John 10).

What shall I preach? The good news about Jesus Christ. Here is a Word from our God which will endure forever and which can enable even exiles to sing a Hallelujah Chorus.

## *Luke 1:26-38*

### *Exegetical Prolegomena*

OUR TEXT is Luke’s Annunciation.<sup>1</sup> It is a simple story, but to the conscientious exegete it nevertheless presents some complex problems. To begin with, it presages the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus and constitutes, with the Matthean account, one of the two New Testament foundation stones of the venerable Christian doctrine of the virgin birth. Therein lies a theological difficulty, at least for many people. This difficulty is not lessened by the existence of stories about miraculous births in the Old Testament and in the literature of the Greco-Roman world. Perhaps there is nothing quite like the New Testament stories of Jesus’ birth in Jewish and pagan antiquity, but they nevertheless reflect an ancient rather than a modern perspective and represent a genre that is at home in a world other than our own.

The text itself represents some complexities. There is, of course, the historical question, whose problematic character we have already suggested. Doubtless the old question, Did it happen? is too simply and narrowly put when confined to the matter of the virgin birth. Yet the intention of the narrative to speak of an

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1. This exposition incorporates parts of an Advent sermon preached in Duke University Chapel, December 1, 1974. The scripture was read from the NEB and that version is used in this article.



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