

“Waiting for the ‘Not Yet’”

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

Our prophetic reading this morning was written during the time of the Babylonian exile. The people of Jerusalem had been taken by force into Babylon, and they did not know when they might return home. Into this barrenness, the prophet speaks words of both comfort and warning.

Comfort, O 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.

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."

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

See, the Lord GOD comes 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; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

It had been a long season of waiting.

The difficult birth was followed by waiting in the neonatal intensive care unit. Doug, the father, worked feverishly to complete his residency at the very same hospital. Even the residency, as grueling as it was, could not prepare Doug and Julie for the waiting they were to endure over the next four months. Hayley was born with a rare congenital

defect. Born of two healthy parents, health was not in the cards for this baby girl.

The waiting was more hopeful at the beginning; hope for surgeries to correct certain things; hope for growth and development. It was, really, a roller coaster of waiting and watching, with exciting periods of “ups” followed by even more discouraging periods of “downs”. At times the waiting had the feel of an ongoing battle: advances and retreats, plans and strategies. The waiting took on a more resigned tenor as everyone began to realize there would be little hope for Hayley’s future, at least not in this world.

Doug and Julie were in a sort of exile. Far away from friends and family, isolated day after day in the sterile environment of the NICU, in a way stripped even of their physical identities as they put on the yellow gowns and white paper masks required to even come near their baby. They wondered, would they ever come back to themselves again? Would they ever be able to go back home?

In the end, there was nothing even the best medical care could do. Hayley never made it home. Hayley left her parents to be with the divine parent. To be with the one who longed to gather her in his arms, to carry Hayley to her bosom.

To parents in exile, such words of comfort as we’ve heard in the Isaiah scripture rang hollow and empty. Comfort? There was no comfort! Doug and Julie could not take comfort. They once had so much faith in God. But God? God was gone.

Why them? What had they done? What had they left undone? It was impossible not to feel they were being punished. Impossible not to blame themselves, not to wonder, “if only . . .” At the same time, it was impossible not to feel they had paid a very, very high price.

But as they endured their pain and loss, something shifted. The constancy of the God who gives, the comfort of the One who promises sustained them even during their wilderness time; even during the time when God seemed completely gone.

Many months later, they discovered medical science might offer some hope for a healthy baby. More waiting was required. The waiting of intensive testing and test results; the waiting of hormone therapy. Waiting many weeks for more tests, and then, finally, hope.

Waiting for the ‘not yet’.

The week in between the interview and the committee's decision stretched interminably. It seemed the reverse of "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday." It was more like "seven days in my sight are like a thousand years. He knew he had to let go and let God make this decision. And even though he was by profession a man of God, the waiting for the 'not yet' was awfully difficult.

It was difficult for lots of reasons. It was difficult because of his pride. It was difficult because of his strong desire to serve and to go on to the next step in the life he believed God had called him to. It was difficult because, over the past few months, he had fallen in love with this church and its people.

If you know anything at all about the call process in the Presbyterian church, you know those 'in between' weeks are weeks (and sometimes months) in exile. They are that way for the Pastor Nominating Committee, because they cannot talk with the congregation about the candidate. And they are that way because the pastor nominee cannot tell his current congregation he is looking to leave them and because he cannot know what the waiting will bring.

This time, he knew no matter the outcome, it wasn't going to be easy. If they did not call him to be their pastor, his own hopes for the immediate future, his own growing investment in this community of faith, would have to end. There would be some grief, some letting go, and a re-investment where he already was with people he already knew cared about him.

And he had been around the block enough times to know that if they did choose him, this would be far from easy as well. There would be another period of decision making, steps to be taken, letting go and moving and learning all kinds of new people. What if it wasn't a good fit, after all? It was risky. He knew that waiting for God's 'not yet' carries risk as well as reward.

Waiting for God's 'not yet'.

Michael and Margaret have been married more than fifty years. They have been through a lifetime together, and now they are nearing the final leg of their journey. Lots has happened to them over more than fifty years, too much to remember. Two more than grown children, two grown grandchildren, trips and adventures, travels and travails.

A few years ago Margaret was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It is still possible to have a pretty clear conversation with her. She is still able to

live at home, though Michael doesn't leave her home alone anymore. She still seems to be present in the moment, but that moment passes quickly.

And then there was the cancer. She has had many surgeries now, countless doctor appointments, chemotherapy. Her oncologist says it's not a matter of "if" anymore; it's a matter of "when." Both she and Michael (mostly Michael) have had to adjust to the unpredictability of knowing that any week things will go rapidly downhill.

They are off to North Carolina this week. To sit on the porch of a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains and enjoy the view. To wait for the sunrises and the sunsets, to feel the cool mountain air upon their cheeks, to once again share this place they have cherished and visited so many times. To wait, in a way, to wait patiently and with grace for the inevitable. I don't know if it's the Alzheimer's of Margaret's insurmountable spirit or just the grace of God that allows her to say, "I want to go to North Carolina one more time before I die."

Waiting for God's 'not yet'.

We are all of us Advent people, waiting people. Waiting for the one who has come and has promised to come again. Waiting for God's great parade to advance on a stunningly beautiful boulevard; waiting for the way to become clear so that everyone may know God's goodness.

Because that is what Isaiah is really talking about. He is talking about mountains being leveled and valleys filled in so that there can be a great celebration, a coronation, a procession of God, with no more barriers.

We are all of us waiting. Waiting to be released from exiles of loneliness or grief, estrangement or pain.

Waiting for the good news that there will be no more babies with defects and no more anxiety about jobs and no more separation from the ones we love, no more death.

We are all of us waiting people. Waiting for the one who comforts. Waiting for the one who endures. Waiting to encounter the one reality that does not fade.