

What God Does: Comforting

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Isaiah 40:21-31
on February 4, 2018 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

A friend of mine tells a story of his friend Allison, who, while she was in college, was accepted into a semester-long position in India at one of Mother Teresa's homes for the dying. It was a lifelong dream of hers to serve alongside Mother Teresa, and like those disciples who traveled with Jesus healing the sick and dying, Allison went about the work of readying herself for the vital service of comfort alongside her hero. But when she arrived in India, Allison quickly learned that she wouldn't be holding the hands of the dying, or treating the wounds of the lepers, or singing the songs of comfort she had imagined. Rather each day, she would do the ordinary and mundane work of making bandages, washing sheets, baking bread. These were the kind of things she certainly didn't have to be in India to do, but yet here she was — on the other side of the world, far from home, just putting one foot in front of the next and providing comfort in the form of tangible aid.

One day, weary from the responsibilities and grieving the dashed hope of what her experience could have been, she asked one of the longtime nuns about Mother Teresa, how often she herself had been there. "Oh, quite a lot" the sister said. Curious, Allison pressed, "and what exactly did Mother Teresa do when she was here?," to which the sister replied,

"Mother Teresa made bandages, she washed sheets, she baked bread."¹ It seems that for even Mother Teresa, comforting the hurting meant seeing them, attending to their most basic needs, and giving them the courage to take another step in their pathways of life.

We conclude our preaching series today called "What God Does," where together we've engaged with passages throughout the Old Testament to catch a glimpse at what God's action in the world might look like. Today's text from the Hebrew scriptures takes us to the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah 40-55 are what scholars call Second Isaiah, marking its clear difference from the first 39 chapters that precede it. Where "First Isaiah" (as those early chapters are called) speaks of wrath and judgment, the opening words of chapter 40 proclaim consolation: "comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term... in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." Such reminders had to be profound for a people in exile.

For that was precisely the state of things for the people of Israel to which Isaiah was proclaiming. Their world had changed in the year 587 B.C.E. In 587, the temple in Jerusalem burned to the ground. That was the year the holy city was destroyed; that was the year that their leaders bottomed out — the dynasty of the family of David terminated and the

¹ Thanks to Dear Friend Rev. Alan Sherouse for this good story of his friend Allison.

key citizens of their community deported to Babylon.² For the people of Israel, 587 marked the the hinge, a pivot point from the Before to the After — from life as we always knew it, ordered and sensical and home, to life as it is now, blurred and powerless and foreign. For a people who rooted their very sense of identity to a place (Israel), and their entire experience of God to a location (the temple), it's no wonder that the voice of the Psalmist cried out for them all: "by the waters of Babylon, there we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Is there no balm in Gilead?"

From such a landscape, it isn't a stretch to imagine Isaiah's recollection of the people's cry: "my way is hidden from you, God! You are ignoring my predicament." Subtext: Hello! God? You seem to have forgotten about us. Do you even care that we are struggling? Don't you remember the covenant we have shared with each other? *Don't you remember us?*

We're not so unlike the Israelites, are we? How quickly we do that too! Whatever that hinge or pivot point in our own lives may be, we experience that life has forever changed on the other side of the diagnosis, the wreck, the fall, the breakup, the announcement, the assault, the phone call, the thing you cannot unsee. For it's as if in an instant, "it's the end of

² Writing about the exile is best done with Walter Brueggemann in hand! This interpretation enhanced by his work *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, p3.

the world as we know it."³ All that we've ever known and held to be true has slammed up against a new reality so unknown yet fully invading our lives, that we cannot help but to feel dazed and confused, angry and forgotten. Suddenly we find ourselves in the wilderness, exiled from the home, the way of life, the truth, the relationships that anchored us to ourselves, to each other, and to God. Life has shifted so completely, and like an injured soldier learning again to walk or a starving orphan learning again to eat, we must relearn how to be and do here on the other side. And while we fumble through this new darkness trying to find our way and ourselves, it is through that disorientation that we cry out to God, 'don't you remember?' Don't you remember what life was like for me before? Don't you remember *me*?

And as if from the very foundations of the earth, God's response comes like a curtain that stretches the heavens to surround us, a tent pitched among us in which to live. "Have you not known?," the Lord says to Israel through the prophet Isaiah. Have you not known me? Haven't I told you from the very beginning? Don't you remember? Don't you remember how I formed you from the foundations of the earth, how I delivered you from slavery in Egypt, how I provided for you a way in the wilderness?

³ Shoutout to REM for this classic phrase!

The question hangs throughout the centuries to those of us who linger in exile, wondering where God is in the midst of the mess and the heartache and the exhaustion and the grief that stops us in our tracks... to which I imagine God responding, "don't you remember that on either side of your life's hinge, I have never left you?"

Don't you remember the way you cried out to me in your distress, and I provided for you — through the gentle kindnesses from friends, days of unexpected rest for your weary soul, small but significant signs of my presence even in your wilderness?

In those days where you felt exiled from the place you once occupied, don't you remember the birdsong so lovely it made you weep, the sunrise that captured a fleeting moment of your hope as it rose like liquid gold on the horizon, the warm embrace of a child that recalled that old sense of delight you used to have?

Don't you remember that I created you and called you beloved, that before you ever knew me, I loved you?

Don't you remember that in Jesus, death never has the final word, that love always wins, that life abundant is available for all people no matter what?

Don't you remember?"

Don't you remember how the Isaiah passage concludes? Verse 31 says this: "but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary, they

shall walk and not faint." In this type of writing, the poet uses a parallel structure on the final three clauses to make his point clear. Each line builds upon the last — mount up with wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint — with the purpose to culminate in the final line. As I've long known and loved this text, I've always thought that if it were up to me, I'd probably have the urge to reverse the order and build to a pinnacle from walking to running to flying. That makes more sense, right? — grander, broader, more majestic to match the majestic God who makes these things possible.

But the more I've sat with this text this week, the more I think the order is just right. (And, frankly, who am I to question these things?!) The late great pastor John Claypool once said, "the truth is that the hardest challenges in life come not at the point of strength, but at the point of helplessness and weakness."⁴ Because as one of my dearest friends reminds me, on the other side of the hinge, sometimes the courage to just put one foot in front of the other is a miracle of God in and of itself. For this friend, when her exhaustion mounts — exhaustion that comes from daily caregiving for her wheelchair-bound husband some 11 years into life with chronic multiple sclerosis, mothering a toddler full of energy and adventure, and shepherding hundreds in ministry — comfort from the Creator looks like enough energy for the present moment, enough

⁴ John Claypool, *The Light Within You: Looking at Life Through New Eyes*, p137.

strength for today, enough bright hope for tomorrow, walking with one foot in front of the next and not fainting. God's comfort comes as she is carried through the small kindnesses from friends and neighbors who rise to meet needs — bandages and bread, even! — for which she never even asked. God's comfort comes as even when she feels like a foreigner in her own life, she is reminded that the God who knew and loved her before the diagnosis is the same God who knows and loves her on the other side.

Comfort was precisely what Cleland McAfee needed too — comfort in the wake of real tragedy. For it was there in 1903 that Cleland's two young nieces of his brother Howard both died of diphtheria within 24 hours of each other. In the wake of such staggering tragedy, what word from the Lord might Cleland — a preacher and choir director of a Presbyterian church in Parkville, Missouri — have to offer that week? Was there any hope to muster, any comfort to find, any reminder he could share with his congregation that Sunday?

Years later, Cleland's daughter wrote about the experience and said this: "The family and town were stricken with grief. My father often told us how he sat long and late thinking of what could be said in word and song on the coming Sunday.... So he wrote [that] little song. The choir learned it at the regular Saturday night rehearsal, and afterward they went to Howard McAfee's home and sang it as they stood under the sky outside the darkened, quarantined house. It was sung again the next day on Sunday morning at the communion service." *There is a place of quiet rest,*

*near to the heart of God, a place where sin cannot molest, near to the heart of God.*⁵

Friends, what God does in this world is comforting those who are afflicted. God does so by helping us to remember who and whose we are, God comforts us by reminding us that no matter the grief or anguish we bear, God is always near, God's heart a place of rest deeper than we could fathom. God comforts us by gifting us with often small yet perceptible reminders of how we are not left in exile to struggle alone. Again in the words of Dr. Claypool: "when there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, then the promise of strength 'to walk and not faint,' small as it may seem, becomes infinitely significant and appropriate; in fact, it is the best gift of all."⁶ And somehow in whatever wilderness surrounds us and through whatever calamity afflicts us, as lost and weary as we may seem, this holy comfort is precisely what we need to remember our way home again. Amen!

⁵ From C. Michael Hawn's catalog of History of Hymns, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-near-to-heart-of-god-arises-from-tragic-loss>

⁶ Claypool, p137-138.