



“This is the Story...”

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Week 26: Comfort to Jerusalem

Isaiah 40

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/RDeIj4I67Kq>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. Through miraculous works, God brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets, and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. Some of the people were sent into exile, and some were left in the ruins of the kingdom. Through prophets and everyday people, God continued to stick with the scattered people and to reveal that God is so much bigger than they imagined. The people were finally able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

- **Key verses:** Isaiah 40:3; Isaiah 40:21-23; Isaiah 40:31

Tell the story: Isaiah 40 is written by a prophet who is with the people in Babylonian exile. The prophet brings comfort to the people, telling them that restoration is coming. Imagine. The people are far from everything they know and love, not able to be with their community. In this poem, the prophet reminds them that God is way bigger than all of this. God is the one who made matter, who lovingly created. God always has been and always will be. And God never gives up on God’s people. You may recognize some of the words in this reading from songs we sing during Advent. People later understood this and many other prophetic texts to be foretelling the coming Messiah. So we read it during Advent, knowing that Jesus is the comfort that comes to the people. Jesus is the glory of God revealed.

- Read Isaiah 40.
- Read page 138 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**

- Isaiah 40 is a poem. This is not unusual in this book of the Bible - in fact, most of the book is written in poetry! Why do you think this is?
- Do any words from this scripture sound familiar to you? Notice all the phrases that ring a bell. You may even want to list out all the songs and commonly quoted verses that come from Isaiah 40. How do the meanings of these quotes and songs change when you think of them in the context of the whole poem - and of exile?

- **Background information:**

- Isaiah 40 begins the second half of Isaiah, and from here on the writings are thought to be by a different prophet (or multiple prophets) living in the Babylonian exile. It would not have been considered dishonest or odd for a disciple/follower of a prophet to continue to prophesy under that prophet's name.
- Isaiah 40:3-4 makes a different kind of sense when you look at the terrain between Babylonia and Judah. Check out a topographic map if you're intrigued.
- The NRSV translates a word in verse 6 as "constancy." The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, a word we know well by this point!
- In verse 17, NRSV translates a word as "emptiness." But the Hebrew is *tohu*. It's an allusion back to Genesis 1:2!
- The final verse of this chapter is familiar to many of us. The first half of it more literally translates "grow new pinions like the eagles" - as in, molt and grow new feathers. It's less about growing something totally new and more about renewal. (*Alter, Robert. 2019. The Hebrew Bible, vol. 2: Prophets. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, pg. 752.*)

- **Conversation starters:**

- It is tempting to read prophetic texts like Isaiah as predictors of things that are going to happen to us here and now. But this text was written in a specific time and place, and it is a commentary on what was happening in that moment. The people of God had REALLY missed the mark, and had to deal with major consequences. Read this passage in the context of people who have been exiled from their homes and place of worship. How is this poem an example of God sticking with the people?
- There are a lot of metaphors here! If metaphors make sense in your household, find all the metaphors and discover what the prophet is trying to tell us about who God is and how God relates with the world.

Microsong: "Comfort to Jerusalem" (Listen: <https://youtu.be/DE9vEvCkzzY>)

Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare's finally over. God is coming, the nations are nothing but space where the Spirit hovers. God gathers the people like a shepherd with sheep and carries the young ones gently. Those who wait and hope in God will run and not get weary.

Sing the big song: (Listen: <https://youtu.be/WxkbTZtNQGM>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.
Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,
And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh ooohhh
A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.
God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses.
Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Oh Ohhhh
The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.
Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"
*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!"*
Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.
God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.
Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.
Corruption in the temple and God sends Samuel.
God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king.
Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.
And when a bully rules the land, a nation tears apart and loses David's heart...
A widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.
Josiah reads this misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did. In his time.
God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...
Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?
Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you?
By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem...
I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.
Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.
Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and
celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.
Comfort to Jerusalem, your warfare finally ceases.
God loves every one of us, it's true. And God loves the universe.

Go do your household project!