

Speak Tenderly

Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8

Sam Wells
Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Egypt and Babylon. The Old Testament is shaped around these two stories. First the children of Israel are slaves in Egypt. God raises up Moses and through the exodus brings his people to freedom in the promised land. Then we wait. We wait to see what they'll do with their freedom. Then they're in exile in Babylon. There they discover a part of God's character they hadn't known before, and they return with a new understanding of themselves and a new understanding of God. Then we wait. We wait to see whether the life they have after their return from Babylon can really be called freedom.

The stories are similar. But there's a big difference between them. Slavery in Egypt is not Israel's fault. They were hungry, so they came to Egypt; they did well there, so they became a threat to the regime; the regime made them slaves to keep them down. So when we imagine Israel in Egypt, we identify with the oppressed everywhere, the downtrodden, the abused and hurt and cruelly treated. We like to read these stories, because it makes us feel righteous. It tells us God vindicates in the face of injustice, God sets history straight.

But Babylon isn't like that. The books of Isaiah and Kings and Jeremiah and Lamentations and Ezekiel make no mistake in portraying Israel's time in exile as a time of suffering and sorrow. But the difference is this. The time in Babylon is *self-inflicted* sorrow. This is suffering that *need not have been*. This is suffering that Israel brought on itself by turning from God's ways. We don't like to read these stories. They don't make us feel righteous. They make us feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. We'd rather take refuge in military and economic and geopolitical explanations for the fall of the Israelite kingdom. But the Bible's having none of it. Israel made her own bed and spent 70 years lying in it. That's what it says.

I wonder how that embarrassment and discomfort touches you. I wonder if there's a suffering and pain in your life that need not have been, because it was self-inflicted. Yes, we spend a lot of time licking the wounds of our slavery in Egypt, resenting the ways the sins of others bring us down and make our lives harder than we feel they should be. But I'm not talking about Egypt today, because Isaiah's not talking about Egypt. I'm talking about Babylon. I'm talking about the place you ended up because you got it very badly wrong.

It may be a very visible place, like Babylon was for Israel. It may be that you know what it means to face public humiliation: to hear the gasp of strangers as they've read about you in the paper or sense the anguish of friends or family members (or former friends or former family members) who know what you did and feel inconsolably let down. It may be that every time you see certain people, you blink and wince because you feel they're judging you for the worst thing you've ever done, and you'll never be able to look them straight in the face again.

Or it may be a secret, known only to you or perhaps one or two others. It may be something you're terrified of coming to light, something you wonder whether you could ever share with anybody without them going cold and distant and politely ending

the friendship. You may be wondering if you'll be spending the rest of your life in some kind of hiding or disguise. You may be feeling like you're living in some kind of a prison of your own making, because most of the courses open to you lead to some kind of disclosure or encounter or reminder that tests the secret to its limit. It could be you find yourself bursting into tears for no reason. Perhaps you're surrounded by people now who couldn't imagine or understand or ever be reconciled to the story you have to tell. Maybe you feel angry or paralyzed that you have to live your life with this secret chaining you down.

Hear these words of Isaiah: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." Now these words are directed at the people of Israel in exile. But I want to look closely at what these words meant to the people of Israel in Babylon to discover precisely what they might mean to you today. Israel has a series of reasons to find God's dazzling new word hard to countenance.

To start with, when you've made a mess of things, when you've sinned big time, there's a lot of hurt. By hurt I mean the impact of wrongdoing on hearts and minds and souls and most of all on the heart of God. But besides hurt, there's also damage. Damage refers to the lasting practical effects of what you've broken. For Israel the *hurt* was their estrangement from God. The *damage* was the fact that they were in Babylon, a thousand miles from home. But look what God says. He says I'll deal with the hurt *and* the damage. "Cry to Jerusalem that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid." In other words, her sin is forgiven and its consequences are healed. That's the difference between forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness deals with the sin, but after the sin is forgiven, there's still the damage to be faced. Healing addresses the damage, and it sometimes takes a whole lot longer.

Israel has another obstacle in the way of accepting God's comfort. "We're 30 days' journey from home, and in between are mountains, valleys, and all sorts of difficult terrain." In other words, I've put myself in such a distant place that even God's forgiveness and healing aren't going to be enough to get me back. Well this is what God has to say about that distance and that terrain. "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." In other words, don't you go worrying about the road back. You know the way when an Eastern king is travelling around his empire, and a herald travels a day or two ahead of him to make sure the road ahead is flat and straight and free of obstacles? That's the way it's going to be for you – a herald's going ahead of you to make sure your route is all flattened out and well prepared. You're going home on a Blue Ridge Parkway to Zion.

And then there's another obstacle. The flesh is weak. We've had two obstacles that said the damage is too great and the distance too far. Now we've got a third obstacle that says my strength isn't up to it. Israel said in the old days we had great figures like Jeremiah and Hezekiah. When we came out of Egypt, we had Moses. But now they've all gone and we've got no one. We say to ourselves, God may have forgiven me, even healed me, and even overcome the impossibilities of the situation I've created, but I just haven't got it in me to face the future. I'm tired. The grass withers, the flower fades: I'm like the grass. But this obstacle is dismantled like the previous ones. "The grass withers, the flower fades. But the word of our God will stand forever." In other words, you're not going to do this in your own strength. You're going to do this in God's strength. To borrow words from later in this same chapter, "He gives power to the faint,

and strengthens the powerless. 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.”

And then there’s yet one more obstacle. And this one seems the biggest of all. We’ve had one about consequences. We’ve had another about distance. We’ve had a third about human weakness. But this last one is the big one. This last one is about fear. Don’t forget Israel assumed anyone who saw God would die. God was so holy, and Israel felt anything but holy. Remember that when Isaiah himself was in the temple in Jerusalem and saw God, he was petrified. It was such a holy moment we recall it at every communion service when we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might.” The first three obstacles are about imagining ourselves without this constant burden of guilt and sorrow and regret. It’s hard to forgive ourselves because we’re used to telling a story in which we’re the main player, albeit a player who ruined the play. Even if we can get over our own reservations about being given a new identity free from our sin, we’ve then got to face up to God. We’ve got to stop looking at the ground and raise our eyes to meet God’s gaze, ashamed as we are. And here it seems we’re in for a big surprise. “Behold your God!” We’re face to face with God, and he’s mighty – of course he is, after all he’s just overcome our weakness, flattened the mountains and valleys, and repaired all the damage we’ve done. But it turns out when we look closer, he’s really a shepherd who loves us like his own sheep. He doesn’t drive us faster than we can go, and when the going’s too much for us, he gathers us into his arms and carries us in his bosom. Behold your God.

That’s how God announces to Israel that her exile is over. God says, “Yes, you sinned, and yes, there’ve been major consequences, but I’ve forgiven you and I’m helping you clean up the mess you made. Yes, you’ve put yourself a long and difficult way from where you should be, but I’ll flatten whatever lies between here and there. Yes, you’re worn out and in many ways you’re as much hurt as those you’ve hurt, but this is going to be done in my strength, not yours. Yes, sin is a terrible thing in the face of my holiness, but don’t be afraid: I love you so tenderly I’ll embrace you, and if you can’t make the road back alone, I’ll carry you over the parts where you can’t walk.”

Think of these words as describing a body coming back to life. The first words are about the mineral—rocks, valleys, and rough ground. Then there are words about the vegetable—grass and flowers. Finally there are words about the animal—sheep and lambs. There’s a cosmic coming alive here – the animal, vegetable and mineral world is coming out of exile too. There’s a political coming alive here – Israel is emerging from more than half a century of obscurity and subjugation. And there’s a personal coming alive here, as we’ve just been exploring. Israel’s alienation from God has cosmic, political, and personal dimensions and consequences. God resolves these consequences in a cosmic, political, and personal way. At the center of these words lies this promise: “Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” God’s solution is so much bigger, so much greater, so much more profound than the problem. Israel had departed from God; after years of grief and sorrow, the result is that *all flesh* shall see God – and live, and the God they shall see is tenderness itself. These words are about Israel coming back to life. That’s why they appear at the very beginning of Mark’s gospel. When John the Baptist says “Prepare the way of the Lord,” he’s saying all these promises are about to come true. Jesus is coming to bring Israel back to life. God the Father is saying to

God the Son, “Comfort, O comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.”

That’s how God announces to Israel that her exile is over. And that’s how God is announcing the same news to you, this Advent – today. You’ve been carrying this humiliation, this embarrassment, this secret, this burden that keeps your head down and your eyes focused on the ground in front of you. You know there’ve been major consequences. But hear this word from God. Comfort ye. You have served your term. Your penalty is paid. It’s over. There may be high mountains and deep valleys between you and where you should be, but every one of those valleys shall be exalted, and every one of those mountains and hills shall be made low: and every crooked path shall be made straight, and the rough places be made plain. God is making a straight way for you, a highway to Zion. You may feel so weak that you feel like grass in the wind, but you will be borne up like an eagle on the wings of God’s Spirit. And he hasn’t utterly forsaken you. He will lead you like a shepherd, and where you can’t find it in you to go further, he’ll carry you in his heart. Feel your body coming back to life – its bones, its flesh, its organs, its limbs, its heart.

Don’t stay in exile any more. That’s not the place for you. God doesn’t want you there. *Here* is your God. Speaking tenderly to you.