

NBC Devotional  
December 16, 2020  
"Here Is Your God"  
Isaiah 40:9

In a recent conversation with NBC colleagues, we observed how the period of the Exile described in the Old Testament has gotten a lot of attention during the current Pandemic. Sermons and devotional reflections have focused on Judah's time of exile in which the people were restricted to Babylon, having been torn away from their homes and homeland. It was a time when God's promise to King David regarding an eternal throne for his descendants seemed to be suspended as Babylon had the only monarch who ruled over Judah at the time. It was a time when the very presence of God was in question because the Temple of God's presence had been destroyed, and many understood that God must have abandoned them as the prophets had forewarned all those years, due to the nation's sin and apostasy.

Preachers and teachers have been reflecting recently on the similar sense of despair and abandonment many are feeling today during our state and national restrictions and our elongated period of isolation.

Beginning early in ancient Judah's time of exile, God began sending word through prophets that God had **not** abandoned Judah. Oracles promising return and restoration are recorded throughout the prophetic literature. At NBC our students over the years have often recited the words in Jeremiah which reflect such restoration promises to the exiles: "'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope'" (Jer 29:11). In the same way, we are familiar with Ezekiel's oracle of promise:

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land.

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

"You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

-Ezek 36:24-28

We recite these oracles because they reflect the character and depth of God's love and faithfulness! For me, there is none so meaningful as the oracle in Isaiah 40. In this instance the words of the prophet create an image of a Divine highway bulldozed and steamrolled through the Syrian desert as a Loving Parent eagerly races toward hurting children to embrace them, renew them, and bring them home. I see gathered here all the dramatic scenes of every father and mother who has run toward their lost and frightened child, groaning with longing to hold them, tears filling their eyes, eager to bring comfort and healing.

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.”

-Isaiah 40:3-5

Isaiah's oracle reaches a crescendo with the exhortation just a few verses later:

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!”**

Isaiah 40:9

As the Judean exiles in the 6th century BC longed to hear these words of hope and promise, **we too** are anxious for the coming of our God. We are eager to hear the herald of good tidings exclaim: **"Here is your God!"**

The season of Advent brings these desires and expectations to a peak as we celebrate God's coming in the Christ child! While the Judean exiles were blessed by the fulfillment of God's promise to come to them, liberate them from exile, and restore them to the promised land; We celebrate God's unique coming to the world! In the case of the Judean exiles, God came as the Almighty Divine God. For us, God has come wrapped in humanity, walking among us as a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, born in the city of Bethlehem at the historical moment when Caesar Augustus had decreed a census, and Quirinius was governor of Syria.

This "incarnation" of God in Christ is the greatest fulfillment of God's coming to people! Not just the Almighty Divine Being, but the Almighty Divine Being appearing as one of us and walking among us. This is the greatest source of hope and inspiration. It brings me to my annual reading of Dorothy Sayers words in her essay entitled, "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged":

What does the Church think of Christ? The Church's answer is categorical and uncompromising, and it is this: That Jesus Bar-Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, was in fact and in truth, and in the most exact and literal sense of the words, the God "by whom all things were made." His body and brain were those of a common man; his personality was the personality of God, so far as that personality could be expressed in human terms. He was not a kind of demon pretending to be human; he was in every respect a genuine living man. He was not merely a man so good as to be "like God" – he was God.

Now, this is not just a pious commonplace; it is not a commonplace at all. For what it means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – he [God] had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile.<sup>[1]</sup>

Dorothy Sayers also wrote a series of plays about the life of Christ. When the wise men come to visit the Christ child, Sayers depicts Joseph and Mary and the child now staying in a Shepherd's cottage being hosted by a kind, shepherd's family who did not want to leave them "in that old stable over in the inn." I would like to read to you a scene in which the shepherd's daughter, named Zillah, the shepherd's wife, and Mary and Joseph are talking, in front of the wise men, about the gifts which the wise men brought.

Zillah: Oh, look at the great gold crown! Look at the censer all shining with rubies and diamonds, and the blue smoke curling up. How sweet it smells – and the myrrh and aloes, the sweet cloves and the cinnamon. Isn't it lovely? And all for our little Jesus! Let's see which of his presents he likes best. Come, Baby, smile at the pretty crown.

Wife: Oh, what a solemn, old-fashioned look he gives it.

Zillah: He's laughing at the censer –

Wife: He likes the tinkling of the silver chains.

Joseph: He has stretched out his little hand and grasped the bundle of myrrh.

Wife: Well, there now! You never can tell what they'll take a fancy to.

Mary: Do they not embalm the dead with myrrh? See, now, you sorrowful king, my son has taken your sorrows for his own. "[2]

Later, the wise men are at their tents reflecting together over the day.

Caspar: Well, royal brothers! The Star has led us by unexpected ways.

Melchior: The treasures we chose for a king's palace serve now as playthings for a baby. And what became of all our fine compliments and prophetic speeches?

Balthazar: I think we forgot our wisdom, and could only ask questions like school-boys.

Caspar: All man's learning is ignorance and all man's treasures are toys. But you, Balthazar, you found a strange new word to speak, "Hail, King of Heaven," and again, "Mary, Mother of God." What put it into your heart to say that?

Balthazar: Do not ask me; I spoke like a man in a dream. For I looked at the Child. And all about him lay the shadow of death, and all within him was the light of life; and I knew that I stood in the presence of the Mortal-Immortal, which is the last secret of the universe." [3]

These reflections on the birth of Jesus remind me of the mysterious and merciful grace wrapped up in this wondrous baby. For in this baby, God almighty, having become human, has taken "our sorrows for his own," and given to us "the light of life." In the midst of our exile, the pandemic, and our personal sorrows; we anticipate with great hope and inspiration the Advent of "the light of life," God incarnate, the wondrous Christ Child who is the salvation of the world!

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