

Isaiah 40:1-11 (Reflective Reading)¹
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Voice: Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God (v. 1).
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 (v.2).

Preacher: Surely, it is good news to the Jewish exiles in Babylon
who were living on the verge of the overthrow of the Babylonian empire
by the force of the Persian King, Cyrus.
But, I am not sure if it is time for our people
to be comforted by such good tidings.
Our realities are not so optimistic;
our personal and corporate sins are too heavy to be lifted away:
Genocide of Native Americans, slavery, anti-Semitism, white supremacy, misogyny, neoliberal
capitalism, homo- and transphobia, Islamophobia, hate crimes, and terrorism
The deeper we look at the past,
the less we are certain of the forgiveness of these sins;
the closer we look at the present,
the more we are discouraged to comfort the people.

Voice: A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God (v. 3).
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 (v. 4).
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (v.5).

Preacher: The wilderness is a habitat of fiery serpents and scorpions,
a desert of thirst, hunger, and death.
Indeed, we are living in the wilderness,
the abode of danger, hardship, and relentlessness,
caused by hatred, violence, prejudice, selfishness, and arrogance.
Can the wilderness be transformed into the way of the Lord,
the death-dealing desert into the life-giving oasis,
in which all people shall see the glory of God together?
In order to construct such a highway,
those who live on the mountains of pride must be humbled,
those who live in the valleys of despair and oppression must rise up,

¹ This is crafted as the first part of the sermon that is going to be preached at the 2017 Academy of Homiletics Conference on December 9, 2017. The text is from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Second Sunday of Advent.

and those who hate each other must become friends.
Are these possible?
Can these happen in our realities?
Even though the Lord has spoken that, I wonder. . . .

Voice: A voice says, "Cry out!"

Preacher: And I said, "What shall I cry?"

Voice: "All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field (v.6).
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass (v. 7).
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever (v. 8).

Preacher: Thanks for the words of wisdom!

All things are indeed changing.
The arrogance of Babylonians and the pride of Romans
who thought their empires would last forever were, in fact,
evanescent like dry grass under a hot wind.
All the rulers and principalities in the world,
even White America,
are controlled by God's breath.
Certainly, God's promise of justice and righteousness endures forever
as the transforming power of the world.

Voice: 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!" (v. 9).
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him (v. 10).
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 (v. 11).

Preacher: God's presence within me and around me comforts me.

God is our shepherd who cares for us tenderly and guides us aright.
God is the source of our comfort and hope,
and strengthens us to comfort others,
by reassuring them that
God, who is all tenderness and compassion,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
is gracious enough to forgive our sins when we repent.
The God of forgiveness leads us to reconcile each other,
and calls us to urgently proclaim to the whole world,
far and wide,
good tidings that the salvation of God is near at hand.

Wherever this gospel is proclaimed,
there is a new beginning—
a new beginning in our country,
a new beginning in North America,
un Nuevo comienzo (a new beginning in Spanish) in South America,
mwanzo mpya (a new beginning in Swahili) in Africa,
bidayatan jadida (a new beginning in Arabic) in the Middle East,
mia nea archi (a new beginning in Turkish) in Europe,
and saeroun sijak (a new beginning in Korean) in Asia.