

# **“The Hidden Christmas Story?”**

## **II. Isaiah of Exile**

### **Isaiah 40:1-11**

ADVENT 2

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Not growing up in a Lutheran family,  
it wasn't until my teenage years  
when I began attending a local Lutheran  
church with regularity and singing in the choir,  
that I realized there was a spiritual preparatory  
season that came before Christmas.

As the forty-day Lenten season prepares  
worshippers for Holy Week and Easter Sunday,  
the four Sunday season of Advent serves  
a similar purpose for Christmas.

It wasn't until I became a pastor that  
I became engaged with two now familiar  
symbols of advent; calendars for Sunday  
school children and wreathes for devotional  
worship at home and in church worship.

Back then the color of the Advent season was  
purple and not the blue we use today.

Early on in my ministry I realized that Advent  
is not an easy time for American preachers to preach.

The theme of waiting and watching permeates  
the texts of Advent.

We Americans, as a rule, are impatient people.

We don't take long lunches like the French  
or afternoon siestas like the Spanish.

We don't look forward to our pensions like the  
British or wait for the crosswalk light  
to change like the Germans.

We don't like waiting around in shopping  
lines or doctor's offices, especially at this

time of the year when there are cookies to bake,  
gifts to purchase and wrap, houses to clean  
and decorate, and trees to trim- all in  
order to get ready for Christmas.  
Even our children and grandchildren can't  
wait for Christmas to come.

Even the lessons of Advent don't help.  
For whom and what are we waiting?

Old testament passages from the major  
and minor prophets look forward to a  
coming "Day of the Lord" when an apocalyptic  
figure will come to an exiled and devastated  
people to bring them comfort and release.

Then there are passages from the epistles,  
the letters of Peter and Paul, who write  
of the return of a victorious Christ to struggling  
people and churches undergoing persecution and suffering

And then, there are the gospel lessons  
with John the Baptist telling crowds:  
"I baptize you with water for repentance,  
but one who is more powerful than I  
is coming after me" (Matthew 3:11),  
and of course, there is Jesus, himself, telling  
his disciple's parables, like the five foolish  
bridesmaids whose lamps ran out of fuel  
before the bridegroom comes in the middle  
of the night.

Back then I was more content to preach on  
these texts that looked forward to – as an  
Advent carol puts it "the long-expected Jesus."

It has become an Advent discipline of mine  
to play George Frederick Handel's master-  
piece oratorio Messiah throughout this season.

While preparing this message, I am listening  
to the London version of 1743 as recorded in  
1977 by Neville Marriner and the Academy  
and Chorus of St. Martin- in-the-Fields.

The back story of the Messiah tells us that

Handel composed this two-part piece with  
53 selections in just three weeks.  
from August 22<sup>nd</sup> to September 14<sup>th</sup> in 1741.  
The work premiered in Dublin on April 13<sup>th</sup> 1742.  
Combined with Old and New Testament verses  
from the King James Version of the Bible  
and from the Anglican book on Common Prayer.  
the Rev. Charles Tenners provided the libretto  
for Handel's Messiah, which has become a fixture  
in concert halls during the Christmas season.

A few historical tidbits about this work:

To accommodate the largest audience possible,  
ladies were asked not to wear dresses with hoops.  
Handel's own superstar status wasn't the only draw,  
many also came to get a glimpse of the celebrated  
contralto, Susannah Cribber, who was embroiled  
at that time in a scandalous divorce.

It was said when Cribber sang "He was despised and  
rejected of men," so moved was Rev. Patrick Delany,  
that he leaped to his feet and cried out "Women,  
for this be all thy sins forgiven thee!"

While the Messiah was warmly received in Dublin  
it did not receive such a reception when it premiered  
in London's Covent garden theater.

And the custom of standing for the "Hallelujah" chorus  
from a belief that King George II did so, which  
would oblige all present to stand, there is no  
evidence that the king was ever present.

The Messiah with a mournful string overture,  
immediately followed by a tenor solo singing  
the opening lines of today's poetic text from  
the fortieth chapter of the Book of Isaiah:  
"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God;  
speak comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,  
that her warfare is accomplished, that her  
iniquity is pardoned" (40:1-2).

For me, it is interesting that Handel and Tenners  
begin the birth story of Jesus neither in Nazareth

with the angel's announcement to Mary that she conceive and bear a son and call his name, Jesus; nor in Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary will end their journey at the place Jesus is to be born,

They begin their story almost 550 years earlier with Isaiah's poetic image of a sentinel, who claims a high mountain and screams at the top of his voice: "Behold your God!" (40:9).

Isaiah then compares God to a shepherd tending sheep: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, and he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom" (40:11),

Why is this prophet poetically speaking of a God who is characterized by gentleness, tenderness, mercy, and empathy towards "all flesh" (40:5)?

Once again we come to God's word, the great living story that is also our story.

So where are we in the story?

We enter the story this morning when the people of Israel are in exile.

But let's take a moment to remember how they got there.

A few years ago I offered a Bible study on the book of Isaiah.

The book was composed and compiled over a span of three hundred years, promoting biblical scholars to divide the book into three parts.

The first part of the book contains the powerful preaching of the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem.

Isaiah of Jerusalem had urgently warned a complacent and arrogant people that the impending war with Babylon will lead to their defeat and destruction,

In the years 587/6 BC Isaiah's prediction came true.

The Babylonians swept away the nations, their king, their temple, their old way of life.

Everything was gone!

Jeremiah had preached that God himself had allowed these tragic events to unfold as punishment for their failure's to be God's people. The warnings of the prophets had become reality.

There, in the ashes, the remaining people of Judah in Jerusalem are forced to march into exile.

They cannot carry with them their homes, their possessions, or even their dignity. All they carry with them is the memory of their God and his promises to Abraham, Moses and David.

However, the Babylonian empire would not last long. By 540 BC, Cyrus the Great had united the Persian empire, taken over Babylon peacefully, and had begun to extend his empire.

At the beginning of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, the people of Judah are still in Babylonian captivity.

This begins the second part of Isaiah, called second Isaiah encompassing chapter 40 through 55.

It is in the context of exile, that the Israel hears these words: "O comfort, O comfort my people"

How we hear and receive a message depends on where we are when the message reaches us.

The circumstances we are in affect how we hear the message.

As I have already stated, Israel hears these words from a place of exile.

And Israel's exile is not just from their land; it is also mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Has God abandoned them? Has God's favor and love departed from them?

The experience that faced the Jewish exile mirrors the Church's experience today.

In fact, the biblical metaphor that best suits our current times and faith situation is

that of exile.

Just like the Jewish exiles, the church today  
is grieving its loss of status, its center place in  
society, its influence on culture and morality.

The ground has slipped from under the church  
as children and youth participate in activities  
and events outside the church.

Older members express a resentful sadness about  
what was, and now is not, and never will be again.

The passing of Christendom might be compared to  
the fall of Jerusalem, and there is no going back.

Victimized by nostalgia and buffeted by fear,  
the church is focused too much on merely holding  
on to its buildings and diminishing resources  
that it currently occupies than to confidently  
reimagine a different but still hopeful and  
robust future.

Beloved people of God.

we can no longer rely on generational, cultural  
and financial support to reinforce our message,  
or the validity of our presence.

In our communities, the people who enter the  
doors to our Food Pantry are too preoccupied,  
too beaten down, too poor to enter the doors  
to our sanctuary on Sundays,

I suspect that the increasing marginalization  
of the church in the West might be the  
very thing that will wake us up to the  
marvelously exciting and challenging  
message of the prophet Isaiah: "Comfort,  
O Comfort my people."

These are words that will not fall on deaf ears.  
they are given to a people who desperately  
need to be comforted; who have longed and  
waited and hoped for such a word from God.

We need a message of comfort that meets us,  
that touches us, and wraps us in its embrace.  
"A voice cried out: 'In the wilderness prepare the

way of the Lord, make straight a highway for our God" (40:3)

This proclamation means that the Lord is coming,  
another prophet, John the Baptist, used these words  
to proclaim the coming of Christ.

Jesus, the Christ is the fullness and character  
of God coming to live among God's people.

This season of Advent is all about watching,  
waiting and expecting Christ to come.

As we look towards Christ's coming,  
we are also to proclaim his coming to others.

The role of proclaiming the "good news" is part  
of the Christmas story, do you remember?

When the angels came to the shepherds bearing  
"good news for all the people" the Shepherds went  
to the manger.

They left the Messiah, glorifying and praising God,  
telling others about what they had experienced.

We are to be proclaimers and bearers of  
God's comfort to the world.

AMEN