

Isaiah 40:1-11 Hard Service Ended

I thought it would never be over. It was the summer of 1981, and after high school graduation I had taken a job working in the kitchen at a nursing home, washing pots and pans. It was hot in that room, with the industrial dish-washer putting out steam and the three large tubs filled with hot water for the pots and utensils that could not go into the machine.

When I first took the job, they questioned whether I could take the heat. I guess that is always a good question in many jobs, but they meant it literally. At that time in my life I had no problem with it, but that did not mean that I liked it. I counted the days and when finally the time came to leave that job and go off to college, I rejoiced and was glad.

The Wilderness

One's mind can be drawn to the Israelite wilderness journey after they had been delivered from bondage in Egypt and before they had entered the land of promise. Because they had hesitated, their journey in the desert lasted 40 years and the generation that left Egypt was not the one that entered the land. Even Moses was left out because in his frustration he had acted arrogantly. They counted the years.

Or one might think of the exile hundreds of years later when a remnant of the Israelites waited for decades to return to their homeland.

The wilderness has become a metaphor for any life experience characterized by the need to endure patiently any hardship, not merely world crises, but circumstances brought about by unresolved issues related to health, relational conflict or estrangements, financial difficulties, occupational setbacks, or any number of things.

More often than not, when we find ourselves “in the wilderness,” we despair and long to change the circumstances as quickly as we can. We would rather live in the peaceful places or the mountain heights of life rather than in its deserts.

Of course we are thinking of the wilderness in spiritual terms, not geographic, and can move from the low places to the high places or the dry hot places without necessarily changing our physical location. I think it is safe to say that we long for a life we wish would never end, and not for one in which we count the days, or the decades.

The Great Proclamation

If the message of the bible is that the wilderness is punishment for sin, then the great vision of the prophet

Isaiah is that the wilderness is temporary, and it is time to get ready to leave it behind.

“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

Before we allow ourselves to rush ahead to the iconic text that we find in the John the Baptist passages of the gospels, we do well to stop and listen closely to what has just been said.

The punishment is over.

The wilderness is at its end.

It is like that job when I was young that I thought would never be over. The time has come to leave behind the hot kitchen for the exciting new adventure. What good news?

God is Coming

And the message is, “in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness, a highway for our God.”

The valleys will be raised.
The mountain will be lowered,

All the obstacles removed

““And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. And everyone will see it.” The Lord has spoken.”

The 40th chapter of Isaiah goes on to compare human smallness and weakness and mortality, with divine magnitude and majesty.

It is at Christmas, of course, that we celebrate at last the coming of God as a human being, in the birth of the child Jesus. Advent is the time of excited expectation because the birth is near. The glory of the Lord.

The Images of the Day

We have considered several images;

The wilderness journey after the Exodus and at long last the arrival and entry of the chosen people into the promised land.

The Babylonian Exile which is the situation of the Book of Isaiah 40 and the return from exile to the homeland.

The long hot summer of my youth with its endless waiting (seems small by comparison), but I mention it because the “wilderness” is a good illustration both of 1 - life itself as a hard journey, and 2 - experiences in life that are temporary, but must nonetheless be endured and can be spiritually challenging.

Mystery of the Christian Life

The mystery, if you will, of Christian life, is that while we have Advent and Christmas, Lent and Passion, Easter and Pentecost, and the time after Pentecost all spread out over the course of the year. They represent expectancy and joy, repentance and sorrow and sacrifice, new life and transformation, and spirit-filled living, which are not nearly as seasonal as our observances of them are.

Everyday is a day of tragic sorrow, and everyday is a day of expectant joy. Everyday is a day of repentance and forgiveness, giving and receiving, birth and death. We celebrate them over time because of our weakness, but we live all of them daily.

With that in mind, listen to the gospel message of the day -

Be comforted, because the time in the wilderness is over and the journey home is now and we encounter God's glory. The long hot summer has ended and the time for glorious rejoicing has come. The obstacles are removed and there is no stopping God's grace now - so that our load can be lightened, and we can take courage, as this chapter ends by saying:

“Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, mount up on wings like eagles, run and not be weary, walk, and not faint.”

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