

Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017



by Fr. Dustin Feddon



Those returning from Babylonian Exile were trudging through new territory, having survived traumatic experiences brought on by their captivity and exile, these sojourners were trying to render meaning to the ancient promises of their God in the aftermath of their spiritual and physical confinement. These were people emerging from the throes of uncertainty and despondency. We catch a glimpse of their profound religious and social crisis when we read in Isaiah 42: "a people robbed and plunder all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons." And yet it is precisely in this moment, as the children of Israel emerge from the darkened caves of exile back into their homeland, that a message of profound hope and restoration is shared with them through Isaiah.

When it comes to capturing the élan of the prophetic voice it is hard to find a more apt interpreter than the great Jewish rabbi and theologian Abraham Heschel. With pithy insights, Heschel recovers the sublime content of their divine speech reminding us just how astonishing is their vision of our world under heaven's gaze. Heschel states that the task of the prophet and God was to bring meaning to the past and present misery of Israel: "to comfort is to throw a glimmer of meaning into a cave of wretchedness." For Heschel this is why we hear Isaiah's cry, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My People, Says your God (Isaiah 40:1).

Who among us has not experienced some degree of social isolation, marginalization, or humiliation? Whether it is through political disenfranchisement, alienation among family or friends, or even estrangement within our own self, most of us know something of being exiled. Any form of estrangement can imprison us from meaningful and intimate relations with others and even our God. For this reason, it is essential those invested in the "comforting of Jerusalem" be self-aware so that we may empathize with exiles and their loss. Do we not identify ourselves as such when we pray: "poor banished children of Eve?" The question isn't so much whether or not we have experienced exile--we have!--but rather to what degree do we allow God's grace to transform our exile into a work of restoring our fellow exiles?

These four verses in Isaiah (40:1-4) express a mission for the Church in today's overly carceral state. Isaiah is speaking to us, challenging us to speak to the heart of those returning into our communities after years of banishment and isolation. Isaiah is speaking to us that we might bring meaning to those who have lived in deprivation and estrangement. With roughly 650,000 to 700,000 of our sisters and brothers reentering our communities every year perhaps it is us, those of us who know something about being exiled, who are especially capable of attending to them with comfort and care. As a people, whose narrative hinges on a comprehensive belief in redemption, we are primed for welcoming those who were once condemned.

My hunch is that our capacity to "dare to hope" for our own redemption is mysteriously interlinked with the redemption of those around us struggling to find their place again among us. So may we hear those words, nay the cry, of the prophet as a profound command to bring comfort to those exiled in our communities as we have been comforted by our merciful God.

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