

How Long is Forever?

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*A sermon preached by
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Text:

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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.

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."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

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!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 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.

Mark 1: 1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now

John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."



You can find pretty much anything on the Internet today, can't you? I typed in the question of my sermon title: How long is forever? Someone has asked it and many people replied:

- Forever is past my death and on.
- Forever is a never ending silence.
- Forever can never be found.
- Forever to me means beyond my own consciousness. Beyond my death.
- Longer than any of us will live.
- Infinite, definitely infinite.
- It depends on which side of the bathroom door you are on!
- It's a limitless dimension, but "forever" is a word. The depth and value of its meaning is based on your personal understanding.
- Based on a perfectly sidereal scale (some kind of timekeeping system astronomers use), forever is about 65 years by human reckoning, but about 3.4 trillion years by physical reckoning.
- Less than 5 years according to more than 50 % of people that get married.
- Exactly the same length as a piece of string

How long is forever?

Just about every world religion has a concept of the eternal – a belief that even when this world disappears the eternal continues on forever –

All that is on the earth will perish:
But will abide forever the face of thy Lord--
full of Majesty, Bounty, and Honor. *Islam. Qur'an 55.26-27*

In primal time, in all time, was the Creator;
Nothing is real but the Eternal.
Nothing shall last but the Eternal. *Sikhism. Adi Granth, Japuji 1, M.1, p. 1*

The One who, himself without color, by the manifold application
of his power
Distributes many colors in his hidden purpose,
And into whom, its end and its beginning, the whole world
dissolves--
He is God! *Hinduism. Svestasvatara Upanishad 4.1*

Even ornamented royal chariots wear out. So too the body reaches
old age. But the [the Teachings of the Buddha] of the Good grows
not old. Thus do the Good reveal it among the Good. *Buddhism. Dhammapada 151*

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will
stand forever. – *Judaism, Isaiah 40*

Forever is a very long time.

One of the first funerals where I officiated was for a man who
dropped over from a heart attack while his wife and I stood in the
room with him. He and I had been outside their apartment where
an emergency had happened and police cars and ambulances and
excitement was all over the place. His wife had been attending my
church so I knew her better than I knew him – but we were
chatting out there when he said, “I don’t feel well. I better go
inside.” We walked in, Marie opened the door, he said to her, “I
don’t feel well,” and fell face first onto their sofa where, the
doctors later said, he died immediately. I ran for a police officer
who came and did CPR – but nothing would have helped.

It was December, 23 years ago, and I’ll never forget that evening
and the funeral later that week. It was Advent – we were hearing
the same scripture as we hear every year. John the Baptist crying
in the wilderness, for anyone who was willing to listen, the words
of the prophet Isaiah – “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his
paths straight’ ... The one who is more powerful than I is coming
after me” – the same words we hear again this morning from
Mark’s Gospel. “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

At that funeral so many years ago, I read aloud the scripture from
the standard funeral service in our Book of Worship – Isaiah 40:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ... A
voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All
people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the
field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath
of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our
God will stand forever.

It was in December, Advent, all those years ago. And every
funeral since that day, whenever I read that Isaiah text, I remember
that sad event. Could anything I said comfort Marie who had just
lost her husband of so many years – far sooner than she had
expected – so suddenly and so close to Christmas? It was a loss
that tilted her life off its axis and changed the direction of her life
forever. “Comfort, O comfort my people.” Was Marie comforted
by hearing that scripture? Is the world comforted each year when
we hear that text again?

This week – another funeral – for a man who would have been 96
this year. “Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God.” I
read it again. Is there comfort in those words?

“All people are grass ... the grass withers, the flower fades ... but
the word of our God will stand ... forever.”

“The Word of our God,” that’s what catches me up every time I read this text, “the Word of our God will stand forever.” Despite anything else, despite any unexpected, December death, despite any sadness, despite anything that causes us to wither like the grass or fade like the flower – despite it all, “the Word of our God will stand forever.”

And forever is a long time. This piece of Isaiah – what scholars often refer to as Second Isaiah, was written as a way to speak to the Jewish people who had just returned from years of exile in Babylon.

They had been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt, says the book of Exodus, from 1428 BCE until Moses led them out in about 1312 BCE; in 722 BCE, they were conquered by the Persians and led away into captivity again; in 587 BCE they were conquered by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and led away again until 538 BCE when Cyrus let them return to Jerusalem. In Egypt, 3,500 years before, they had been slaves to Pharaoh; in Babylon, 2,600 years ago they were slaves to Nebuchadnezzar. So many years had passed, and really, nothing had changed. But they were back home now – they were uncertain – they were confused and afraid – maybe this would happen again – but for now they were home and Isaiah wanted them to get that reality.

2,600 years ago Isaiah told the people that God’s word would stand forever. Was it wishful thinking? Israel had been tossed to and fro for generations – they, like the grass and the flowers, came and went, faded and died, generation after generation. Isaiah could not know if what he was saying would hold up until the end of time. But he said it – he wrote it down – and we read it again today. I read it at funerals, we hear it at Advent, “the word of our God will stand forever.”

Advent invites us into a different reality than the world allows for us. The world tells us that all is fleeting – like the grass in the field – and we better grab as much as we can now because soon it will be gone – and nothing lasts forever. Nothing. The world tells us

that if we’re quick enough, nimble enough, sharp enough, we can come out on top of it all – the one with the most toys wins. And unfortunately that sentiment often dominates during this season of waiting and hoping that leads us to celebrate Jesus birth.

John the Baptist knew that. John is faced with a dilemma. How do I tell a world that is consumed with the things of this moment that there is far more beyond here if they can just wait? He cries out in the wilderness – much like Isaiah did nearly 600 years earlier. “A voice says, ‘Cry Out!’ And I said ‘What shall I cry?’” John found his voice and he shouted out what he knew to be the truth, what had been revealed to him, that “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” Not, “Look here, I’ve got it all, here is what you need and it won’t last forever so you better grab it now!” That’s not his message, is it?

John is like – I’ve used this image before but I like it so here it is again -- John the Baptist is like the guy whose car stalled in heavy traffic as the traffic light turned green. All the man’s efforts to start the engine failed and the longer the wait became, the louder the honking behind him became and grew more and more irksome. The man finally got out of his car and walked back to the driver behind and said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t seem to get my car started. If you’ll go up there and give it a try, I’ll stay here and blow your horn for you.” John the Baptist was the one who got out and went to those who claimed to be God’s children and suggested that he blow their horn for awhile while they tried figuring out how to jump start their preparations for the Messiah’s arrival.

And guess what? That’s a forever job. If we stop calling out – if we stop sending that different message out into this world, if we fail then the world’s message of grab-all-you-can-greed wins out. Gordon Gekko wins – “Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures, the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind and greed.”

No ... it's not, says Isaiah; *No* ... it's not says John the Baptist; *No* ... it's not says Jesus; *No* ... it's not we better be saying if we believe that the word of God stands forever.

Forever is a long time – it's beyond time – it controls our sense of time and place.

Does that word of Isaiah, “Comfort, O comfort my people,” give comfort to the grieving widow at her husband's December funeral? Perhaps it does. Just maybe those 2600 year old words mean as much then as they do now to we who are in our own exiles – personal exiles and loneliness, torn relationships and anger at the unknown, struggles of emotion and physical wholeness. The exilic moment is there for us as individuals and as a people.

The world is not transformed; people still die—“all flesh is grass”—and reprieve is only temporary—“the flower fades.” Here the same perception of the world is heard as in the confession of Isaiah 64. The voice agrees—the grass does wither and the flower does fade. This call does not deny the world. But, the voice concludes, reality consists of more than what plain sight and common sense can perceive. Reality is informed and shaped above all by the eternal, everlasting, transforming Word of God. For those who have ears to hear, this Word defines reality.

Such a claim stands at the heart of this word of comfort, at the heart of all of second Isaiah: the very speaking of this word of comfort transforms the reality. The exiles, and we who would hear this word with them, are invited to re-imagine the world on the basis of this proclaimed, poetic vision. The power of this invitation is forcefully described by Walter Brueggemann:

The very act of poetic speech establishes a new reality. Public speech, the articulation of alternative scenarios of reality, is one of the key acts of a ministry among exiles....This theology of the word refers to a sense that there is an indefatigable agency at work in the historical process that takes its own free course and has its decisive

say without conforming to the power and processes of the day.

This is a word of comfort which defies logic and marks Advent as a period which redefines reality.

Take comfort, Isaiah reminds us, take comfort. When it feels like there is nothing left, God's word still stands, God is left. That is the message of Advent that points us toward the manger. Wait, act, prepare, be present in this world and in God's word. Hope, peace, joy, love. Advent calls us to reboot our year – we start again this season on the church's calendar – and reboot our lives – reboot our world into a new reality in which we live out that message that the Word of God stands forever.

Get you up to a high mountain,” says Isaiah. From that high mountain let us tell the world that God's word is the only thing that lasts forever and that in that we can take great comfort.

Amen.