



December 10<sup>th</sup>

## THE NEW SHOFAR

Of all acts of man repentance is the most divine. The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none. Thomas Carlyle

### The context for Isaiah 40 is vital background

It is important to read through **chapter 39** of Isaiah, or at least the last few verses if we are to appreciate the power of today's reading from **Isaiah 40:1-11**. Here is the ending of **ch.39**...*Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: <sup>6</sup> Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD. <sup>7</sup> Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'*<sup>8</sup> *Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.'* For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'

What is surprising is that while the exile is anticipated in **Chapter 39** it is only assumed to have taken place in **Isaiah 40**. It is as if the editors did not need to—or perhaps could not bear to—talk about “that” time, when God handed over God's beloved Daughter Zion into the hands of a vicious foreign army. With no description of the exile the readers necessarily fill in the literary gap with their own memory and imagination.

### *Comfort, comfort my people – the prophetic task*

Chapters 40-55 can be gathered up under the command to *comfort* God's people. They have been shattered, not just by the violence and horrors of the exile to Babylon but even more so by the thought that God allowed, even invited the Babylonians to be the force that brought God's children to their knees in despair and horror. Their sin brought them down, for in the Bible, sin does exactly that. But now it is time for healing and what God seeks to bring to his people is *comfort*.

In Hebrew the word comfort means *to come alongside to give aid in time of need*. **2 Corinthians 1:3-4** expands on this for us...*God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.*

In their worldview, *their* defeat was God's defeat. It was as though Yahweh had been conquered by the Babylonian gods and it left them with serious faith challenges. Was the Israelites' sin too much for God? Had the Almighty abandoned them? If that was true, and it **appeared** to them as though it was, what hope had they for the future? Does God *want* to deliver us? *Can* He deliver us? *Will* He deliver us?

The first verse of **Isaiah 40** is essentially God's emphatic response to these questions: “Yes.” Thus, the Hebrew word used here, *nachamu*, is best translated as *strengthen, encourage, provide with a sense of security and hope*. God is saying: “Encourage my people. In the middle of their discouragement, give them courage. Speak tenderly to them. Speak to their hearts. I want to deliver you.”

## God is always “*God-in-action*”

And the rest of **Isaiah 40** goes on to do exactly that, concluding majestically *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.*” —**Isaiah 40:29–31**

The implication of this imagery is that God has abandoned Jerusalem, handing them over into the hands of the Babylonians (cf. Ezekiel 10). **Verses 3–5** seek to assure the audience that the time of Yahweh’s long absence from Jerusalem has come to an end. Yahweh will return to his holy city where he will once again be accessible: *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (verse 5)*. The language of revelation in verse 5 is very important. The glory of the Lord needs to be revealed because, from the exile’s perspective, it has been hidden, and a hidden God is a terrifying God. **Isaiah 40:1–11** seeks to convince its audience that the season of God’s hiddenness has come to an end.

It is important to note how the God of Isaiah is never discussed in the abstract, only in terms of specific words of demand and promise being offered. And for Zion, those promises are that: “The Lord **comes with might**, and his **arm rules** for him” (verse 10)...“**His reward** is with him, and his recompense before him” (verse 10)...“**He will feed** his flock like a shepherd, **he will gather** the lambs in his arms” (verse 11)... “**He will “carry** them in his bosom, and **gently lead** the mother sheep” (verse 11).

### “*Here is your God*” – **Isaiah 40:9** and **John 1:29,36**

The first expression of comfort is the way God speaks of Israel, as “my people,” (40:1). Even though multiple chapters in Isaiah speak of the sins of the people that are incompatible with God’s desires for human community, actions and failures that end in punishment, God continues to identify as their God. God does not overlook or ignore those behaviours, but all people should know that God has not abandoned Jerusalem. God intends that they will have a future together.

This is what John the baptizer goes on to celebrate when he points to Jesus as being The Lamb of God, the One coming in the Name of the Lord God. All of those magnificent guarantees given by God are now accessible in Jesus. It is Jesus who is the One sent by God to inaugurate a new divine reign in creation. This divine ruling cannot be undone by sin for it is established in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. All we can end up doing is cutting ourselves off from those blessings and make it difficult for others to access these life transforming graces.

We do this by sin and sin leading to death is partially described in **Matthew 25** which we read recently... *For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.* Advent is the time when we are invited to take this to heart and to prayerfully ponder the way I live under God’s rule, and whether people can say of our words and our deeds, **there is your God**. If not, then it is time to listen to the words of John and **Repent**.