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Isaiah 40:1-11

Third Message

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THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE KINGDOM: ALL THINGS NEW

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

My neighbors across the street celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary yesterday. Their children threw a surprise party for them and asked me to renew their wedding vows and remarry them. About 100 people attended. I thought to myself, "What a rare thing in this valley, to see a 50-year legacy of loyal love!" It is such a contrast to what we usually hear about.

Not everything is that great in my neighborhood, however. Around the corner from their house another couple wanted to build an addition to their home, and to save money they decided to do it themselves. But nothing was built according to code. The foundations are crooked. A chimney seems to go nowhere. The floor plan is totally unworkable. Before they could complete the work they ran out of money. All that is left is about 2,000 sq. ft. of framing studs, with tar paper for a roof. The house is actually worth less than when they began their improvements. It has been sitting that way, exposed to the elements, for over a year now.

How typical of many marriages and lives in this valley—lives that are not built according to code. People want to build on their own. They think they can take shortcuts, but their foundations are out of whack. There is no coherence to their lives, and they are exposed to the community and to the elements. These days I am getting more and more calls from people saying, "Our marriage is in ruins. Can you put it back together?" Just last week a woman called me asking this very question. I told her, "It's a lot easier to do new construction than to do remodeling when the foundations were wrong to begin with."

But the good news of our text this morning is that it is possible to begin anew. In our studies in the book of Isaiah, the news which the prophet gives to his nation Israel is the announcement of a kingdom where all things are made new. So I am going to take on the role of a building contractor this morning. I am going to give you the blueprints for restoring and rebuilding a life that has been wrecked.

The book of Isaiah was written for three different historical situations, thus it divides into three easy parts. In chapters 1–39 Isaiah addresses his contemporaries regarding the Assyrian invasion. In chapters 40–55 he leaps ahead 100 years and speaks to the exiles in Babylon, announcing a new kingdom which will be inaugurated by a Servant who is coming. Finally, chapters 56–66 comprise the word to the exiles upon their return to Jerusalem. In this series we will delve into chapters 40–55, the announcement of a new kingdom.

Our text this morning, chapter 40:1-11, plays like a drama in four movements. The first movement takes place in Babylon, where the word of the prophet calls to the exiles. The second two movements depart from the city of Babylon to the wilderness, and again a voice is calling to them. Then in the last movement we are in a city again. So we move from the city to the wilderness to the city. But the city is no longer Babylon, it is Jerusalem. The exiles are home, they are healed, and this time a new voice speaks. So in each movement there

is a voice giving an invitation, in three different geographical contexts.

I. New beginnings in Babylon: "Comfort My people" (40:1-2)

Let us look at the new beginnings. Verses 1-2:

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem;

And call out to her,

That her hard service has ended,

That her punishment is accepted;

For she has received of the LORD's hand,

Double for all her sins."

A. The nature of comfort: A future restoration (40:1-2a)

Listen to the tenderness in this Father's voice. The days of estrangement are over. God, speaking through the prophet, uses the words of a loving husband, eager to woo his estranged wife. The word "comfort" is used twice for emphasis. This Hebrew word means a sigh of compassion; it also means to repent. It is used of God's deep sigh of compassion when he judges his people, and then he is so compassionate he changes his mind; he relents. Notice the title given to the people. No longer does he call them "this people." He calls them "My people."

Then he says, "Speak to the heart," of this people, and "Give them an invitation." Call out to them that their relationship has been restored. Their exile is over. There is a brand new beginning, a clean slate. What makes this new beginning possible? What is the basis of her comfort?" The text says, "Her punishment is accepted."

B. The basis of comfort: The past has been dealt with (40:2b)

The reason there is comfort is that the past has been fully dealt with. When God spoke to Israel back in Leviticus, he said that as a holy nation they were to set aside one year in seven to give the land a holy rest, a sabbatical year. Israel was in the land for 490 years, but never once did she obey the Lord and give the land a rest. God said, "If you do not do that, I will scatter you among the nations. Your land will become a desolate waste, and I will give it its sabbatical rest. You won't take time off, so I will make you take time off." He takes them back to the land of Babylon and the land enjoys 70 years of rest. Why Babylon? Because Abraham was called from Ur of the Chaldees. That is where this whole thing started. God is saying, "You can have a new beginning when you face the past."

I had a friend who actually made a bid on the house I mentioned earlier. Then they found a pit in the back yard that was filled with garbage. The family had removed the septic tank, and instead of filling it properly, they just threw all kinds of garbage in it. They were told, "If you are going to build an addition, you have to dig that up. You cannot just build willy-nilly on top of this thing." That is what

makes new beginnings possible—truly facing your past, beginning afresh. In this case God says, “Your past has been dealt with and your punishment is accepted. There is satisfaction. There is propitiation.”

So true comfort comes from facing one’s guilt and its consequences before a holy God. You cannot have a future until you do that. Israel had served her sentence in full, and the Lord was satisfied. That is the good news of the cross. God is satisfied with what his Son did, so any of us can face our past. The Lord says, “I am satisfied. You can go on.”

II. New Relationships: Meeting the King in the wilderness (40:3-5)

Having announced these new beginnings, the question arises, “Once we receive this announcement that all things are new, then what do we do?” Israel is now invited to participate in the new kingdom. She is to go out into the wilderness to meet her King. Look at verses 3-5:

**A voice is calling,
“Clear the way of the LORD in the wilderness;
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the rough ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed;
And all flesh will see it as one;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”**

What is Israel to do? She is to go out in the wilderness and “make a highway for her King.” This word “highway” would be significant to the exiles in Babylon because the city was laid out around a great processional highway that went through the center. This was where the gods met with the kings. The highway was 40-50 feet wide, and as the Jewish exiles walked on its paved stones they read these words underneath their feet, “I am Nebuchadrezzar, King of Babylon...I paved the road of Babylon with mountain stone for the procession of the mighty lord Marduk. May Marduk, my lord, grant me eternal life.” The Babylonians had hymns about this highway. They sang about their gods coming down from heaven. The god would say,

“From hostile Elam he entered upon a road of jubilation,
a path of rejoicing...of success to Su-an-na.
The people of the land saw his towering figure,
the ruler in (his) splendor.
Hasten to go out, (Nabu), son of Bel,
you who know the ways and the customs.
Make his way good, renew his road,
make his path straight, hew him out a trail.”

Then the Babylonians would ask the captured Jews, “Why don’t you sing a song about your god? Where is he?” That is when Psalm 137 was written: “By the rivers of Babylon we lay down and wept. We remember Thee in Zion.” The Jews responded, “How can we sing when we are here in Babylon, and our God has been defeated historically?”

What Isaiah says is, “God will demonstrate his power in making a highway, but the God of Israel does not show his glory in idolatry. He shows his glory by controlling history, and he is going to defeat Babylon. You are going to find him in the wilderness, so make a highway for him there.”

A. The necessity for obedience: Listen to the voice

To enter into this, Israel was, of course, to go and meet God. We know where these words were fulfilled. The minute we open the New Testament we read of a voice crying out in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord.” John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Israel was to go out in the wilderness and repent, and then the King would come.

In order to repent, the first thing the nation had to do was to obey this voice. But notice that the voice here in Isaiah is vague, obscure, almost cryptic. It never calls attention to itself. In the New Testament, this cryptic, anonymous voice, according to Jesus, is the greatest prophet ever born—John the Baptist. “Among those born of women there is none greater than John. He was filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.” But in the text he has no title, no designation. That is because when this new kingdom comes and the King arrives, his glory is so great that no other name is to be mentioned next to his. When a building contractor erects a new home he places a sign in front of it advertising who did the work. But in this kingdom, this contractor, Jesus, is so great that no subcontractor is to have his name on that sign.

That was true of John the Baptist. Though he was the “greatest born of women,” he said concerning Jesus, “I must decrease, He must increase.” He was the best man at the wedding, and the best man does not go on the honeymoon. Many Christian leaders who insist on having their name and title and glory rob people of intimacy with Jesus Christ. They insist on going on the honeymoon. But that is not how it is to be in this kingdom.

B. The necessity for vulnerability: Go out to the wilderness

The second thing that will show they are repentant is that they will be vulnerable. Where will they meet this King? Where will he become intimate with them? In a wilderness where they cannot cope, where they have no props, and nothing to support them. It is a land of cosmic enemies, historical enemies, and earthly enemies. There is no seed, no future there. If God does not act supernaturally to save them, they are dead. That is the wilderness.

What is true of Israel is true of us. To enter his kingdom you must hear this voice. You must leave, and you must allow yourself to be found in a wilderness where you cannot cope. The reason many Christians today do not have intimacy with Christ is that they have entered the wilderness in their motor-homes. They are heavy-laden, therefore God cannot deliver them and meet their needs.

It was a very specific time in my life, at my wedding, in fact, when God told me to leave. My parents at that time were not excited about my coming to this church to become an intern. My father sat me down a year earlier and said, “Brian, I want you to look at Harvard Business School. I really want you to go there or to Stanford. I will pay your way. Get your M.A. in business. Then if you want to be like Billy Graham, go ahead. But first get your M.A.” That was not bad advice by a loving father, but it was not what God was calling me to do. I knew at that point I had to leave mother and father to cleave to the Lord. To do so I had to go to a wilderness where I had no money, no props, no financial support, that I might be found by God. And God found me. That was a very specific time in my life.

C. The necessity for repentance: A smooth highway into the heart

That is what Israel must do. And if she will do that—be vulnerable, repent, and remove all these obstacles to repentance—then she will be building a highway: the mountains will be made low and

the valleys lifted up. That is a metaphorical description for making a highway into your heart by removing all the stumbling blocks that keep this King from coming in. If you will do that, Isaiah says, the King will meet you and all his glory will be seen.

“Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed; and all flesh will see it together.” When God acts, he is not going to do his work in a corner. All the people saw God’s glory when he led his people out of exile. When God became incarnate his glory was revealed, and today his glory is seen in his church. And when he comes again his glory will be seen. God does not perform his salvation history in a corner: “For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

So, once the Kingdom is announced, Israel is not to be passive. She is to go out into the wilderness to meet her King. And she must be willing to be vulnerable and honest about her sin. Then she will be found by her King.

Now the question arises, “How do you know it will work?” A woman called me last week and asked, “Can you fix my marriage?” I asked her to tell me about it.” She said there was adultery involved, and that the marriage was in bad shape. I said, “Well, I do know a way to make it work.” “What is your record?” she asked. I said, “My record of remodeling is not as good as new construction, but it is not because of the method.” When you ask the question, “Will it work? Will this really work in my life?” the answer according to the text is, “Yes.” It is because this new King, this new contractor, builds with different material. Look what he says in verses 6-8:

III. The establishment of the kingdom: A new security (40:6-8)

A voice says, “Call out.”
Then he answered, “What shall I call out?”
All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness 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 stands forever.

I read a magazine article on leadership last week. The author said we are living in an age when people are anxious for our leaders to lead. If they would only come up with a vision, and share that vision with the people, then they could take the nation into new territory. But what we have is a crisis leadership that merely reacts to circumstances and events. It is much like going down the Colorado River in a canoe. You do not control when the rapids come or how long they last; you just hang on and react. Hopefully, you pretend to be calm and pray your canoe does not capsize as it goes through the rapids!

A. Not by flesh: Weak and temporary

Isaiah says that is the way all of man’s kingdoms end up. The best that man can put forward, says the prophet, is grass. The beauty of it is like the flower of the grass. This word “beauty,” or loveliness, is actually the Hebrew word that means loyalty. In other words, it does not endure. Man cannot keep his promises.

Babylon was absolutely impregnable. The city had two walls for defense. The inner wall was 21 feet thick, 300 feet high, and was reinforced with 420 foot-high towers every 60 feet. The wall was wide enough to sustain four chariots abreast, and it measured 56 miles around the city. The Babylonians dammed the Euphrates River to

make a moat clear around the city for protection. The city had many gates, and the beautiful Ishtar Gate has been reconstructed, brick on blue enameled brick, and it is on display in Berlin. At the end of the processional stood the temple tower, the ziggurat. Like a pyramid of boxes, its base was 300 yards square. It was eight stories high, and it looked like a mountain. Next to it stood Marduk’s palace. The walls were gold, with alabaster pillars supporting a cedar roof. Throughout the city there were 1,800 open-air niches housing shrines to different idols. This was the glory of Babylon, but Isaiah compares it to the flower of the grass. It will not endure.

B. A kingdom of word and spirit: Permanent

“But the word of our God stands forever.” In contrast to Israel and Babylon, however, this new kingdom of which Isaiah speaks will be built not by the hands of men, but by the Spirit (“the wind”) and Word. This “wind” simultaneously destroys the works of man and builds God’s kingdom. Here is a hint that Israel’s return through Cyrus will come through the destruction of Babylon, and the birth of the church through the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Because of this, the new kingdom will be permanent. Peter builds on this truth in his epistle, exhorting believers to long for the pure milk of the word because “you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living abiding word of God” (1 Pet 1:23).

Will it work? Absolutely! This new kingdom will be built by the word of God. As it evolves it will destroy kingdoms of men built upon idols, and establish a new kingdom that will stand forever.

The Jews have gone from Babylon, and they have heard three times the voice in the wilderness. Now in the last movement we are in Jerusalem. But this time a new voice is calling.

IV. A new joy in Jerusalem: Being a witness for the King! (40:9-11)

A. The joy of being a witness of the King (40:9)

Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”

There is new joy in Jerusalem, and the Jews are becoming witnesses for the King. They go to the highest point in the city to announce his coming. We get the word “gospel” from these words, “bearer of good news.” The messenger comes to the city, announcing that the coming King will make all things new. When your life has been rebuilt in Christ, with new foundations and materials that will last forever, you don’t have to take a course on witnessing to tell people the good news about what happened to you. You just naturally share your life with everyone you come in contact with. That is the mark of a healed life—sharing with others in appreciation for a remodeled and remade life.

Notice what the Jews were to share with others, the words, “Here is your God.” The work of salvation is so great that God will not entrust it to anybody but himself. Here we have a hint of the incarnation. Jesus was never embarrassed to apply these texts to himself. You can share this with your Jehovah’s Witnesses friends who do not believe that Jesus is God. Jesus sent out his disciples, telling them, “Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel...you shall not finish

going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.” He applies this text to himself.

What kind of witnesses shall they be? Verses 10-11:

**Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His recompense before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs,
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.**

B. Being a faithful witness to His character as a judge (40:10)

The King is coming like a judge, as in the Exodus. His revealing will be majestic and powerful, convulsing the cosmos and overthrowing the enemy. What God did to Pharaoh he will do again in Babylon, and with the coming of Christ will use all his cosmic powers to defeat the greater enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil.

C. Being a faithful witness to his character as a shepherd (40:11)

On the other hand, the King is also coming like a shepherd. The same arm which he uses for judgment he uses to gather, feed, and gently lead his sheep. We find a picture of this in the Old Testament when Jacob returned from exile with his wives and children and all his flocks. As he was about to meet his brother Esau, he asked Esau to allow him to pass in a leisurely way. Fathers can learn from this. When I take my family on vacation I want my children to ski like me, swim like me, etc. But I have discovered that they cannot do that. They must be gently carried at times. Once when we were horseback riding in Oregon, my older daughters could keep up, but my youngest daughter screamed when she saw her horse. I found her a pony which was more suited to her, and led it around the paddock with her sitting in the saddle. This is the picture we have here in verse 11.

The early Christians were faithful to share this at great cost to themselves. The King is coming. He wants to care for you and hold you in his bosom. But there is a small window in time for your decision, and if you do not respond, he will be your judge. For the Jews, that particular coming was AD 70. They had 40 years, a generation, before that prophecy was fulfilled, and 1.2 million Jews were killed when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. They were those who had refused to enter into the bosom of the shepherd. Let us be faithful witnesses to God’s character as a shepherd.

A number of years ago a friend told me his wife had left him. He said he had a number of problems, and that she had given him a list of seven things which she wanted him to change. He had tried several times to do so, but the more he tried the worse things got. I asked him what part if any Jesus played in his life. He said he was in prison once and that someone had told him about the Lord. He had invited the Lord into his heart, but that was all he knew about him. I told him that the One whom he had asked to forgive his sins would make him the kind of husband his wife desired to have. He went home and told his wife what I had shared with him. Later, she came to me and said she had no confidence in what I had told her husband. “You haven’t lived with him,” she said. I told her I didn’t need to know David; I knew Jesus Christ. I said to her, “Betsy, if you give your life over to Jesus, he will make your marriage everything you want it to be.” She too came to Christ. Every married couple they knew were having marriage problems, and they shared with all of them their new life in Christ. About 10 years later Betsy died, but even in the hospital she continued to share her faith.

That is the kind of kingdom that God has for us. There is a new life in store for us who live in Babylon if we will go out into the wilderness to meet this King. The tragedy was that after Isaiah announced this news, a great many Jews remained in Babylon and they never met the King. I pray that like my two friends, everyone here will find this King and have their lives rebuilt.

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