

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (Year B)

### Hugs! <sup>1</sup>

**Prepare for the Lesson:** Prepare the video(s) to be shared by having it up on your screen and ready to share.

**Fellowship question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion and lead into the study):

When is a time you have felt that you didn't fit in? (Examples to get the ball rolling, if necessary, might be as a minority or while visiting a country that did not have English as a native language.)

When you are discouraged, what is it that someone else can do that gives you encouragement? (a card, a call, a kind word, etc.)

### Information

In our Scripture lesson today, the entire Jewish population is depressed. This is because they are no longer a nation. They had not been for many, many years. Although God had sent prophets to warn the nation that God was angry about their oppression of the poor, their disregard for God's laws and for their worship of false gods, the nation would not listen to the prophets' warnings.

- Have a class member read Isaiah 1:1-6; 18-20.

"The structure as a whole resembles the movement of a lawsuit, and the initial summons to heavens and earth (v.2) indicates that this is a prophetic lawsuit in which the Lord brings a case against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.... In the background of this case is the prior relationship between Yahweh and Israel – that is, a covenant.... However, the language is even more intimate than that of the covenant between God and people. The relationship between God and people is like that of a parent and children."<sup>2</sup>

The people of God ignored God's message. So, God sent judgment.

Assyria swept into Israel (the Northern Kingdom) in 722 B. C. They took the Israelites with them back to Assyria. Then, in 587 B.C., Babylon did the same for Judah (the Southern Kingdom). Foreign lands were the new home for these exiles for many years.

---

<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2025. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Gene M. Tucker, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 52, 53.

Before their exile, the Hebrew people had three ways to identify themselves: they had land, a Temple, and a king. Now, they had none of these. Imagine what the typical Hebrew person in exile must have felt like about their heritage, their homeland and their hopes for the future. How do you imagine they may have felt?

Hopefully, we will not experience national exile ourselves, but we know of persons in the world who are forcibly displaced by political powers that imprison or send the indigenous people into refugee camps or prison camps. Or, in our own nation, “reservations.” Do you know of someone who is living here now because of political turmoil or war in their homeland? What do you know of their story?

Here is one example. Dr. Andrew Mbuvi is currently a religion professor in North Carolina. He shares his experiences in a commentary on Daniel (which has as its setting the Babylonian exile):

“Not unlike Daniel’s and his companions’ positions in the biblical narrative, my story begins with a forfeiture of privilege.... For the four Jewish young men, it meant having to start from scratch about learning a new culture, language, and economic and social systems – the conqueror’s systems. It entailed a downward spiral from royal status in Judah to mere students with little ability to choose even what they ate or learned. For me, loss of privilege meant going from being a professor in a liberal arts college in Kenya to being a graduate student in America.... I had moved from *using* the blackboard as a sign of authority and status, and for dissemination of information as a teacher, to *cleaning* the blackboard as a means of raising funds for my living expenses while earning minimum wage as a graduate student and janitor.”<sup>3</sup>

What complicates an exile is the reason for it. Some people are in exile through no fault of their own. Because of political, ethnic, or social systemic pressures, they must leave their homeland. According to Isaiah, the reason for the Hebrews’ exile was very clear. There was a cause and effect. They had broken the covenant. They had forgotten their Creator. They had to leave the “promised land” to reflect on their relationship with the Promise-giver.

The prophet Isaiah, “far from being the detached analyst, was one who strove passionately for the preservation of the community from cynicism and despair with the conviction that life is not driven by arbitrary forces but is guided by a loving God who remains true to a universal plan of justice.”<sup>4</sup>

While in exile, a new prophet comes on the scene with a message of hope.

- Have a class member read Isaiah 40:1-5.

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Mbuvi, s.v., “Daniel,” *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures From Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 274.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995.), 4.

Isaiah 40 and what follows has such a different flavor from what precedes this chapter that many Biblical scholars believe there were multiple prophets over the years who were in the “school” or tradition of Isaiah. Here we have the new prophet’s “call to ministry.”

George Frederick Handel put music to these words. Some of the most popular Christmas music is drawn from Handel’s Messiah.

[Play the selection of the Messiah by Handel, “Comfort Ye” and “Every Valley.” There are also several versions of this tenor solo on YouTube, including this one:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpabbnnYRBk> This solo is 5-6 minutes long.]

“In the wilderness” would bring to the Hebrew people the memory of a prior exile. They had been taken generations before as slaves to Egypt. Can someone remind us of that story? How did the Hebrew people go from slavery to the wilderness? How long was that wilderness? How could this image of wilderness give hope to those in exile?

The wilderness is not a geographical location, but a spiritual description.

“The coming of God will mean upheavals in the created realm, but especially in the place where once God had come in judgment. This ‘wilderness’ lies not between Zion and Babylon, but constitutes the graphic location of God’s wrath in judgment.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s wrath is completed. The covenant is renewed. The parent welcomes home the prodigal.

“This word of comfort has specific content: The era of warfare under which Israel has suffered incalculable loss and shame has come to an end. Termination of conflict, however, is not attributed to luck or chance. It is given specific theological grounding: Peace has returned as a result of the restoration of a proper relation between Israel and her God, that is, ‘her iniquity is pardoned’ (v.2).”<sup>6</sup>

Though we have never been in a literal national exile, there have been times when we lived in our own personal wilderness of sorts.

Silently, reflect on your life story. Is there a wilderness chapter in your story?

Does anyone have a story you would share of a time (present or past) that you consider to be a wilderness experience in your life? How did hope come to you? What lesson(s) did you learn?

- Have a class member read Isaiah 40:6-8.

---

<sup>5</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 335.

<sup>6</sup> Hanson, 19.

At first reading, this message may not sound so cheery. “People are grass that dies, flowers that fade.” What is the message of hope in this passage?

The “word of God that will stand forever” is about to be proclaimed. (Though we often refer to the Bible as “the word of God,” the prophet is not referring to those “words” that would be gathered together much, much later. He is using “word” to mean the “message” for God’s people.)

- Have a class member read Isaiah 40:9-11.

“Here is your God!” is the message that the prophet is to proclaim. This is the “word of God” from the new prophet. What is the good news about this message?

“Here is your God” could sound like a threat, if your image of God had been that of a judge. How does this imagery of a shepherd compare to that image?

What needed to change most for the people in exile – their self-image or their image of God?

“The transition from divine absence to divine presence was not an easy one.... The prophet directed the attention of the people to one reality, before whom all earthly powers were mere grass. Although glorious in power.... God is a God of compassion and he now addresses people with forgiveness. And he promises to deliver them from their bondage. He will gather them and carry them and lead them like a shepherd.”<sup>7</sup>

It is notable that all four Gospels quote Isaiah 40 in their early chapters in reference to John the Baptist. He has been referred to as the last Old Testament prophet. Once again, a new image was needed of who God is and who the people of God are.

### **Transformational exercise**

As we look around us, there are people in exile. Some are separated from family, others from health, others from a settled life. Some are separated from careers that gave them identity. Some are separated from God, possibly because of distorted image of God. These people need hope. They need a helpful, positive image of God. They need someone to share the “Here is your God!” message.

We are to be messengers of hope. Sometimes that is expressed in words. Sometimes that is expressed wordlessly with a smile or a “thumbs-up” or a hug. The prophet’s words of comfort were verbal hugs.

In this video, there was a movement happening in Italy of people offering strangers “free hugs.” Let’s watch their responses to this offer:

---

<sup>7</sup> Hanson, 25.

[Show the 3:37 minute YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scHfgnJqhCg>]

In silent reflection, who is someone in your life that needs a hopeful word-hug this week? Are you willing to voice or demonstrate that hopeful message? How could God use you to give that word-hug?

Close in a prayer something like this: *Lord, when we are in exile, we feel lost and confused. We need a hope and a future. Help us to receive your word of comfort this morning. Help us to be actively living your good news this week. May we be your hug to the exiles.*