

These words in Isaiah chapter 40 begin what is called the Book of Consolation. Before chapter 40, the prophet Isaiah is preaching to a recalcitrant Israel. The natural consequences of their mistreatment of the vulnerable of their nation were looming on the horizon. Soon they would be taken off to Babylon to live in exile for 50 years, providing a labor force for the Babylonian empire. All of Isaiah’s efforts to get Israel to change her ways and avoid this national disgrace were futile; Israel nurtured the seeds of her own downfall.

Yet, even in defeat, Israel is not forgotten by God. The prophet voices words of comfort. There will be a future for Israel, just not yet. Before God gathers the lambs once again and gently leads the mother sheep, a great leveling must occur. A way must be prepared. The valleys must be lifted, the mountains and hills made low, so that uneven ground will become level. Rough places must be smoothed and THEN, only THEN the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

Isaiah uses this topographical metaphor for the unequal and abusive society that Israel had become, the reason for their disintegration as a nation. Israel had not cared for her widows and orphans. There was a gulf between the haves and have-nots. Isaiah says there must be a leveling, because God can not dwell within such a nation. Isaiah has this ability to provide comfort and prophetic judgement simultaneously. Israel’s judgement and exile is the first step in God’s leveling project.

Bill Goettler, from Yale, offers his reflection on our texts. He tells the story of Danny, a homeless man who occasionally asks Goettler for money or work. At the close of every encounter Danny ends with this question: “Reverend, is this the way it’s supposed to be?” Goettler says it’s like a one-line sermon reminding him of the sermon in Mark chapter one, right out of the book of Isaiah: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make God’s paths straight!”

Goettler says that he (and we) would prefer to get on to the story of a young family on a long journey with animals and a baby. But John the Baptist says, “You’re not ready for that story. Remember Isaiah. Every valley shall be lifted up. There will be equity for the meek, justice for the poor. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

Before we get to Christmas, we must first hear God’s prophetic words of “the way it is supposed to be.” And somehow, in our limited and inadequate ways, we are to help with God’s leveling project. Before the baby is born, “the way must be prepared, the valleys lifted, the mountains made low, so that there is some sense of justice in this world that longs to welcome God in Christ.” This peacemaking is hard work. We are caught between doing all we are able to do and knowing it will not be enough.

We find inspiration in the stories of those who have worked for peace in highly difficult circumstances. (Show slide.) Leymah Gbowee is one of the Nobel Peace Prize recipients for 2011. But in 1990 she was a frightened 18 year-old-hiding in St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Monrovia, Liberia, with close to 1,000 other refugees. She and her family were rescued by an uncle just one day before government forces entered the church, killing 500 people. Ten years later she was working at St. Peter’s, helping traumatized women and child soldiers. In the spring of 2002 she dreamed a voice commanded her to gather women to pray for peace. Her story is told in the documentary film: “Pray the Devil Back to Hell.”

She answered the voice in her dream and gathered women to pray. They dressed in white symbolizing peace and sat in the market and on a soccer field from dawn to dusk with only water

and signs proclaiming their cause. They prayed and they sang. Finally, they were heard. Gbowee presented this statement to the government:

“We are tired of war. We are tired of running. We are tired of begging for bulgur wheat. We are tired of our children being raped. We are now taking this stand, to secure the future of our children. Because we believe, as custodians of society, tomorrow our children will ask us, ‘Mama, what was your role during the crisis?’”

In 2003 the ruthless warlord, Charles Taylor, was exiled and then charged with crimes against humanity. Leymah Gbowee describes her peacemaking this way:

“I didn't get there by myself... or anything I did as an individual, but it was by the grace and mercy of God.... He has held my hands. In the most difficult of times, he has been there. They have this song, ‘Order my steps in your ways, dear Lord,’ and every day as I wake up, that is my prayer, because there's no way that anyone can take this journey as a peace-builder, as an agent of change in your community, without having a sense of faith... As I continue this journey in this life, I remind myself: All that I am, all that I hope to be, is because of God.”

Peace is hard to preach about because I know my own actions fall short; I, too, am challenged by the prophet's words. But as we each do what we can do, as we send our mission angels flying, we cannot lose heart. Listen to these words by Reinhold Niebuhr:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”

Let us continue to pray and work for peace that is *shalom*; may God grant us the ability and the courage to be peacemakers.