

Journey to Bethlehem 1: *Through Darkness*

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Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak 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. ³A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every 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. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹Get 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!"

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He 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.

Matthew 1:1-6, 15-17

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. ²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,

The genealogy continues until it stops in verse 11, and says “at the time of the deportation to Babylon.” Then verse 12 begins, “and after the deportation to Babylon” and continues a list of names of people we have never heard of until:

¹⁵and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Both of the gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, make sure we know that the Child who is to come was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph – as Matthew puts it – *had lived together*. So it's interesting that Matthew opens the gospel with such a lengthy family tree of Joseph, who presumably is not – shall I say – the biological father of Jesus. Even if there were countless cheek swabs and a mountain of DNA evidence, I am fairly certain that Ancestry.com could not sort out this family tree. However, like many of us who are interested in tracing our family heritage, every first century Jew would claim Father Abraham as a forebear, and many would presume to be kin to King David.

The challenge was that in the centuries between King David and Jesus there was not much national pedigree to be proud of because of the Babylonian exile. So Matthew gives us a list of names we've never heard of going back a thousand years to make the claim that the little baby about to be born in Bethlehem is descended from Israel's real royal family. King Herod the Great, for example, whom we will encounter in Jesus' birth narrative soon enough, had no royal blood. Herod was simply an opportunistic military commander the Romans made into a king to further their Middle Eastern agenda. As one biblical scholar notes, going back through King David to Abraham, Matthew's genealogy is actually "a political statement. You sure wouldn't want Herod's spies overhearing you boast that you were part of the true royal family."¹

That, you see, is Matthew's point. Jesus is not just another person on a big family tree; but he is hope for a new day to dawn during a bleak and oppressive time. This birth, Matthew is saying, is what God's covenant community has been anticipating for thousands of years: the Messiah, the promised Savior, the King of Kings.

¹ Richard Lischer, *Just Tell the Truth*, p. 40.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we begin our journey toward Bethlehem with a host of biblical characters for whom the birth of Jesus was their goal, their hope that had been forged over centuries. Hope for improved human welfare, a viable economy for all, freedom from oppression, redemption. Today we remember the people who made the longest journey to Bethlehem of all. For in the middle of that family tree, we are called to pay attention to the most difficult years in their history: *the time of the deportation to Babylon*. Matthew emphasizes the exile by repeating it: from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to the Messiah, fourteen generations. The exile was the formative season of God's people leading to the birth of Jesus. They became the pillage of war, refugees in a foreign country, subjected to the worst forms of violence an invading army can dish up.

Sometimes we forget that it was this long season of devastation and displacement that gives us our favorite Christmas prophet, Isaiah. When we hear Isaiah echo down the corridors of time on Christmas Eve, saying, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined*; the preacher can hardly get too specific about the darkness. It would not be the pastoral thing to do on Christmas Eve, huddled as we are with children and college students and so many visitors who come to sing about a baby in the warm glow of candlelight. But here on the first Sunday of Advent it feels the responsible thing to do is to pay attention to the darkness, to pay attention to the Babylonian exile that twice breaks into the genealogy of Jesus, because the darkness was real. The darkness is real.

Into deep darkness, the prophet speaks words that we desperately need to take into our hearts. To the worst devastation life can bring, Isaiah says, "I have seen the future, and it belongs to God." Our reading from Isaiah 40 begins what is called the Book of Consolation, addressing the exiles. Not only had the people of ancient Israel been

defeated by Babylon, and carried off in humiliation, the worst thing of all was – there had been no word from the Lord for two hundred years. So at last, into their forlorn silence, the word of the Lord finally came – in a double imperative: *Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. The Lord is coming into your exile; into your bondage in slavery. A highway for your return is being prepared. All flesh shall see the glory of the Lord. Even the Babylonians even will see it. Do not fear. A way is being made to take you home. Isaiah says: ... See the Lord comes with might. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, gather the lambs, and gently lead the mother sheep.*

The experience of exile is one that most of us, will endure sooner or later – the sense of being away from what one knows and loves; of being God-forsaken in a strange place; the sense of being dislocated by some unexpected event, or diagnosis, or horrific loss. We cannot minimize the plight of ancient Israel; and it must be said that it was more like life in Ukraine just now, or in a Syrian refugee camp; but we can identify with the idea of their journey through darkness toward light. We can identify with the need to hear God’s consolation come through our own traumatic experiences of feeling dislocated, lost, and completely uncertain about the future.

In the United States, the sheer fact of gun violence throws all of us into an existential exile. There have been more than six hundred mass shootings this year, more than two a day – and the everyday locations of them are heartbreaking: at a wonderfully inclusive bar for the LGBTQ plus community in Colorado; at a Walmart in Virginia where people were buying ingredients for Thanksgiving Dinner; outside Overbrook High school, four students shot less than five miles from here the day before Thanksgiving. And there is a form of political gridlock, if not economic oppression, refusing to limit the purchase of guns. All manner of studies show America is in a crisis of despair.

The Brookings Institute has released data on the toll despair is taking on our well-being, on health and longevity; its effects on our

politics, and its barrier to reviving labor markets and productivity. The report says – The American Dream is in tatters. It says despair is driving nativist politics, vulnerability to fake news, populist messages and skepticism about science. Our society’s despair is a big factor in the ideological polarization that is hampering our responses to social and economic challenges. What does this report from the Brookings Institute which researches economics and public policy say is the needed antidote to despair? Hope. Lack of hope is a central issue, the report says. In a study that outlines the challenges of economic disparities, political polarization and the social crises of increasing mental illness, addiction and suicide, the report says the central need is hope.²

Are we not a people in exile longing for a brighter tomorrow? That’s what the season of Advent proclaims is coming to the people of God – hope. Even in long periods of exile, there is hope that God is doing a new thing with great power, but it is not the kind of power we have reason to fear. According to Isaiah, the Lord is coming with might, but God’s might is found in tender strength to feed the flock like a shepherd. God’s strength is in the tenderness; the tenderness is in the strength. That’s what we find at the end of the long journey through darkness. A tiny, vulnerable baby is born, and an extraordinary power is unleashed in the world. Tender strength. Strong tenderness. Through the worst seasons of exile – personal, national, global – we cling to that hope.

Earlier this fall I was in Chicago for a meeting with a small group of pastors, and I was reminded of an amazing story of hope that came through a horrible season of exile. It happened at the famed Drake Hotel in downtown Chicago. In the late 1990’s, a woman in New York named Anny Stern, received a call from another who said, “I have a package for you from your mother. This came as a shock since Stern’s mother, Mina Pachter, died during World War II of malnutrition in the

² Brookings Institute, America’s crisis of despair: a federal task force for economic recovery and societal well-being.

Terezin concentration camp. But here was this package from Mina Pachter that had somehow made it into the hands of her daughter after all those years. When Anny Stern opened the package, she discovered a collection of recipes handwritten by her mother and the women of Terezin. She was so shaken that she put the book away for years, unable to look at it. But eventually the Terezin recipes were painstakingly translated and published by Bianca Steiner Brown, a former Terezin inmate who had become the editor of *Gourmet* magazine.

Finally, the Holocaust Museum hosted a luncheon at the Drake Hotel in Chicago that showcased some of these remarkable recipes. “Imagine this,” the newspaper article explained, “Elderly gaunt women sitting around a bunk bed whispering in the dark, feeding themselves on memories of potato herring dishes and desserts made of rose hips. Imagine them jotting in ornate German script the secrets to chicken gelatin or directions for stuffed goose neck. Imagine these women huddled together in a concentration camp remembering the lives they left behind: kitchens that smelled of cinnamon, tables draped in linen, families feasting on strudels and tortes and dumplings.

Imagine them fortifying their souls with memories of preparing and sharing food. Imagine them wishing that they could pass on their recipes to their daughters like generations of women before them had passed them down to them. And then imagine them learning that their recipes survived the Holocaust even though they did not, and that more than fifty years later, their food would come alive among the crystal chandeliers and the gold velvet curtains of the Drake Hotel. The elegant meal finished with the thinnest sliver of bittersweet dark chocolate torte made from a recipe by Mina Pachter, while their host had this to say: Take the cookbook home. Put it on your kitchen shelf and look at the extraordinariness but wonderful mundaneness of your kitchen. Choose one recipe, serve that dish, tell the story.³

³ Chris Chokoian shared this story with the Moveable Feast Preaching seminar in 2016, first recorded in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1996.

Friends, this is the story of our forebears in faith who knew the darkness of exile, of people who walked this weary world, so often plagued by evil and violence, but who did not give up on a future wrought by a strong, tender, hope-inspiring God. For generations they longed for a brighter tomorrow. They saw the future and tell us it still belongs to God. This is also the story of far too many people today.

We are being called by Isaiah, called by the genealogy of Jesus himself, called by a world in need to help usher in God's future with tender strength and strong tenderness.