

“Trapped in the Middle”

(A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: Romans 11:1-36 and Isaiah 51

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Matthew 15:21-28; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Subject: A nation ripe for judgment.

Desired Response: Let the righteous be comforted.

How To: Memorize Isaiah verses about comfort.

How Long: Take an hour or so.

Sermon in a Sentence: ““In a nation ripe for judgment, God’s word to the righteous is ‘Be comforted.’”

Worship Theme: “God wants His beloved children to daily draw comfort from the reality of His Presence in their lives.”

Have you ever gotten trapped in the middle of a difficult situation? Though not responsible for what was going on, because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, you couldn’t avoid involvement. It’s not a pleasant experience!

This must have been how certain people felt back during the time of Isaiah’s ministry in the 8th century before Christ. They loved the Lord, even as this great Prophet did. And, they agreed with God’s warnings that because of sin their nation was in deep trouble. But, identifying with His words must have been about as much fun as preparing your own funeral service. You understand what I mean, don’t you?

If the nation of Judah fell, those righteous people trapped in the middle would be included among those who must suffer. And, that’s like you being supportive when someone preaches that it’s quite possible God will punish our nation—the United States of America—for its wickedness and use a foreign force like China or Russia or radical Islam to do it.

Anyway, today I want to introduce two words that come up every so often. Most of you already know what they mean, but let me just briefly jog your memory. The first is the word “exile”—or being forced to live away from one’s homeland.

When the ten tribes of Israel to the north—often called the northern Kingdom of Israel—were conquered, their identity was totally destroyed. It was as if they passed off the face of the earth. This wouldn’t be the case, however, with the southern Kingdom of Judah—actually the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and those Levites who had remained faithful priests of God. Numbers of her citizens would be taken captive, and they would live as a group of Jews in another land. This extended exile would be the means by which the nation’s sins would be

expiated. They would be in exile, but they would retain their identity through their determination to maintain as much faithfulness to God as possible.

Sometime this coming week, you may find it helpful to read Isaiah 27.

"Measure by measure, by exile thou did'st contend with them," writes Isaiah. "Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin. ... For this is a people without discernment; therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them."

As you study the Book of Isaiah, you will find "exile" comes up every so often. Sometimes it's the actual word; in other passages it's the concept. For example, Isaiah 6, which is an early vision of the prophet:

"I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,"

...and so on. Well, that chapter ends with God saying:

"These people hear, but they don't understand."

"How long?" asks Isaiah. "Until cities lie waste," is the divine response, "... and the LORD removes men far away"—or exiles them.

Then, God concludes His message with this picture of Judah:

She is an oak that's cut down, but a stump remains. "The holy seed is its stump," He explains.

And now, we have the second concept that needs to be kept in mind—the "righteous remnant." A "remnant" is something that's left over. In this case it's the faithful among Judah who truly worship their Lord—the holy seed. After all the sifting of the chaff and grain, they will still remain, and, quote:

The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; for out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

Actually, that's not a bad definition for "remnant"—"a band of survivors."

See, God's purposes will not be thwarted. Always He will have a select group of those who truly love Him. Maybe you recall the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 11

¹ I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: ³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? ⁴ And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." ⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶ And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened,

⁸ as it is written:

"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day."

⁹ And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. ¹⁰ May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever."

Paul continues in verse 11:

¹¹ *Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹² But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring!*

¹³ *I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.*

¹⁷ *If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.*

²² *Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!*

And, then, Paul shares an important truth:

²⁵ *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, ²⁶ and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:*

"The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. ²⁷ And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

²⁸ *As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, ²⁹ for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. ³² For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.*

Paul ends this chapter with these words of praise and thanksgiving:

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

³⁴ *"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?"*

³⁶ *For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

"Has God rejected his people? NO!" Paul responds. "Why, I'm a believer who's a Jew! God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." So too," writes Paul, "at the present time there is a remnant."

This theme of a remnant of those in exile appears in Isaiah 51, too. For example, here are verses 11 and 12:

"And the ransomed of the LORD shall return."

In other words, the day will come when a faithful contingency will come back and rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem—the exile will end—and we have those accounts in Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

“... They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. ‘I, I am he that comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies?’”

In this verse, Isaiah 51:12, we have God’s response to the dilemma of faithful Jews who were trapped in the middle—trapped in the middle of the crunch of wicked nations.

“Don’t be afraid,” He says. “Instead, be comforted.”

But, to inject a little feeling into what I just said, let me put it this way.

“In a nation ripe for judgment, God’s word to the righteous is ‘Be comforted.’” Why? Because the Lord looks after His own.

As you study the Book of Isaiah on your own, which I encourage you to do, keep in mind this general framework. The prophet’s long ministry will include a national shift from good to bad, back to good and then to bad again. Restated, Uzziah and Jothan are generally thought of as good rulers, but under them sins begin to mark the people. Then with Ahaz the moral climate declines drastically. King Hezekiah comes on the scene and there’s revival. But, at his death, wickedness returns with a vengeance under the reign of Manasseh.

Now (speaking generally again) the first part of Isaiah (1-39) contains warnings during the first of these two dips. The prophet is younger and his words are characterized by predictions of judgment.

In the second section (40-66) there’s a noticeable shift. Good King Hezekiah is dead. Isaiah is older, and the prophet sees a decline following the time of revival. The people are returning to the evil of former days. The new king is impossible. In fact, tradition has it that Manasseh ordered Isaiah killed by sawing in half.

Well, the most characteristic theme of these later chapters, as the man of God perceives the trend and knows that an exile is ahead—not that his warnings cease, but his key theme is ... COMFORT.

God has not forgotten His promises—He will astound you—bad days are ahead, but remain faithful—trapped in the middle, the end is not yet—just wait and see what God will do.

To underscore what I’m saying, here are the very first words of Chapter 40, which begins the second major section of the Book of Isaiah.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

“A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ... The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

You may recognize those words that George Frideric Handel immortalized in his great oratorio, *Messiah*. You know what those promises are about, don’t you?

Look, I don’t know a much better way to encourage you if you feel trapped in the despair of attempting to be a man or woman of God in an iniquitous land like ours than to tell you to read the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Study his themes. Treasure his words. I believe they will provide you with reassurance, solace, and calm.

I would suggest that you choose a verse of comfort from Isaiah and memorize it. It might take you an hour or two to commit a verse to memory. But, it should remain with you for a lifetime. Here are a few examples. Isaiah 49:13:

“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.”

Isaiah 51:1-3:

“Hearken to me, you who pursue deliverance, you who seek the LORD; look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for when he was but one I called him, and I blessed him and made him many. For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”

Isaiah 51:11-12a:

“And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. ‘I, I am he that comforts you.’”

Isaiah 52:8:

“Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice, together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion.”

I really believe Isaiah’s encouragement was part of what later sustained people like Daniel when his life, as a young man in Jerusalem, was disrupted by war. The city he knew and loved had fallen, as Isaiah had prophesied, and Daniel was among those captives headed away from home and marched for hundreds of miles to Babylon. But, God was with Daniel. Several times the text says precisely that. And, God will be with us if we someday face a similar fate—or even experience Isaiah’s painful death. I think of the words to a chorus by Wendell Lovelace. I learned them as a boy.

What though wars may come,/ With marching feet and beat of the drum,/ For I have Christ in my heart.

What though nations rage,/ As we approach the end of the age,/ For I have Christ in my heart.

God is still on the throne, Almighty God is He;/ And He cares for His own through all eternity.

So let come what may, whatever it is, I only say/ That I have Christ in my heart,/ I have Christ in my heart!

It’s conceivable the generation that will be most needy concerning Isaiah’s great promises has yet to pass from the scene. So, please continue to study the Book of Isaiah and make these prophecies yours.

Are you trapped in the middle? If so, be assured that you’re not alone. The Lord has kept for himself a remnant of thousands who have not yet bowed the knee to the enemy.

Don’t be frightened. When righteousness marks God’s people, they can take confidence in His protective care, and judgment is averted by those who choose that in which God delights.

“In a nation ripe for judgment, God’s word to the righteous is ‘Be comforted.’”

That's right! Let me say it again: "*In a nation ripe for judgment, God's word to the righteous is 'Be comforted.'*"

Yes, indeed, "Be comforted"—nurture the belief that the world's greatest king is coming soon to reign.

Amen.