

Sermon:
The Glory of Yahweh and the misery of man
Isaiah 40:1-11 Mark 1:1-8
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In a Dutch newspaper, I read the sad story of a man in the city of Rotterdam who bit off the ear of his girl friend; he then decided to jump from the 20th floor of his apartment building, sick of himself, sick of life.

His plans went well until he hit the ground, where he only broke his arm; In hospital they set his arm, and he was arrested for the abuse of his girlfriend. How desperate must that man be – he could not even jump well.

Here in Egypt millions of young people are deeply frustrated. A few months ago the young woman Yara Salem was sentenced to prison because here in Heliopolis she held up a piece of paper with the words 'freedom above all'. She did that for 10 minutes and got three years in jail.

But being responsible for the killing of almost a thousand people, that does not matter. We live in a world where injustice rules.

Often enough we enjoy life - but we must also often conclude that life can be a dry desert. Even when our personal circumstances are fine we cannot avoid heartache for what goes on around us.

Advent is very much the season in Church life when we focus on the hope that God offers to us and to the world we are living in.

God told the prophet in the Old Testament to offer hope to the people of God. 'Comfort my people, for the glory of God shall be revealed.'

Israel had returned from captivity in Babylon, they were free in their own land... but it was still not right. The temple had been rebuilt, but God had not returned to his temple. And life without God at the heart of it, is empty, hollow, meaningless.

The land of Israel, once so great, had become a spiritual desert for the people.

Would God again come in their midst, or had He abandoned them forever?

The Bible takes our problems seriously; it doesn't dress them up. What good would it have been for the prophets to explain to the Israelites that they should just accept their fate? Surely,

God has not returned to us, but well, just go on living, try to find meaning in life, create your own meaning.

Israel had a real problem, just as many of us have serious problems that deserve to be taken seriously. And in Israel's time of real crisis, God spoke to his people, offering hope.

Yes, indeed, life is a desert: you people are like grass, withering away in the heat of the day. There is enough reason to be depressed about reality.

But the word of our God will stand forever; what He has promised long ago, to Abraham and his offspring, will be fulfilled.

God had promised Israel life in shalom in their own land with the Lord God in their midst; this Word of God, this promise, stands forever, Isaiah says. So boldly he announced better times, a new day:

Comfort, O comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term and that her penalty is paid.

God promised a new start, and the core of the promise, was that God himself would be in their midst again:

The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.

Jerusalem is told to not fear for:

Here is your God, coming with might and as a tender shepherd who will feed his flock.

What a lovely promise for anyone who is in great need. God can change our lives, as He is powerful, and He will do it, for He is a loving shepherd.

Isaiah suggests that God offers a new Exodus. Israel looked back to its Exodus from Egypt into their promised land, but now, to Israel, God promises a new Exodus.

This is suggested by the words about the way in the wilderness that must be prepared; this highway for God is obviously the way back to Israel.

Strange in fact, because Israel had already returned from Babylon. But as the Spirit of God had not returned to the Temple, as they did not experience the presence of God, life in Israel was still, as it were, life in diaspora.

The idea of a new Exodus is also suggested by the words that the Glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and that all people shall see it. The Glory of the LORD, was in the first place the presence of God in the column of fire and smoke that guided the nation through the desert like a shepherd.

This column of fire and smoke descended on the tent of God, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Later, it rested on the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. But the Temple was destroyed; the Ark had been stolen, and God's Glory was no longer with Israel.

But now, God promises a new life, meaning, that He would be present with the people again.

At the time of John the Baptist, the Glory of the Lord had still not returned to the Temple; Roman foreigners ruled the nation, sin, misery, problems and fear had not disappeared from the daily life of the Israelites.

Where is God? They had their land, their houses, their business, they lived securely. But still. How does it help us, today, to have our assets, our real estate, our jobs, our pension, how does it help us to have everything organized quite well, if we still experience life as a desert journey?

The French writer Blaise Pascal wrote in his *Pensees*:

Nothing could be more wretched than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection...

Israel looked at itself and asked: Where is God? As a result, different movements sprung up, trying to answer those questions.

There were the Sadducees, who told the people to lead a good life, enjoy it, and not worry too much: 'What we have is all there is... Learn to live with your sense of emptiness.'

There were the Essenes, a sort of monks, who withdrew from society to create the perfect life in their sectarian seclusion: 'Yes, circumstances in life are awful, but God will bless us in our soul and in our small happy community, let us forget about the rest of the world...'

There were Zealots, radical political groups trying to clean the land from the evil Roman occupation. 'If only we kick the Romans out, then God will return to the land...'

Very strong at the time of John the Baptist was also the movement of the Pharisees; they argued that only the most radical adherence to all the laws of God would bring God back to the Temple. 'If only we were better people, then God would bless us again...'

In the midst of Israel's predicament, in a time of moral and political confusion, when people were scrambling for a ray of hope, John the Baptist stood up.

John the Baptist proclaimed the same comfort to the nation of Israel as Isaiah did; what Isaiah had promised, had not been fulfilled yet. John the Baptist did not need to explain this; the people knew it from their own experience.

Even if all circumstances in our lives are fine, the absence of God will still leave us with a heartache that only He can solve.

For people who would love to bite off their girlfriend's ear, who would like to end the misery of their life, and for people with a less dramatic desire for change like most of us, the preaching of John in the desert points to the real Exodus out of darkness into the light of the presence of God Himself.

In Isaiah, we saw the promise that the *Lord God Himself* would come to be in the midst of His people, as the source of salvation, comfort, and peace. Let me repeat some words:

The way in the desert was the way of the LORD, of Jahweh. (vs. 3)

A highway had to be made for our God, for Elohim. (vs. 3)

Here is our God, Elohim, had to be announced to the cities of Judah and Jerusalem. (vs. 9)

The sovereign LORD, Jahweh Elohim, is the one who is coming with power (vs. 10)

So, the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, was expected to come and to be in the midst of the nation, for Him a highway had to be prepared; this is what Isaiah announced.

Then John came and proclaimed that this highway had to be prepared, for God was now, finally, coming.

The presence of the Lord God, nothing less, is what John promises, exactly like Isaiah. And what did he do?

He pointed at Jesus, the one who was coming, and called Him more powerful, and that He would give people the Spirit of God. Who would bring God back to his temple.

In the Old Testament, the expectation was that the Lord God would come with might and tenderness; in the New Testament, we see that God indeed came - in the person of Jesus Christ.

There was no doubt for the early Church that the coming of Jesus Christ was what had been promised in the Old Testament: the coming of the Lord God. That is why Mark opens his Gospel with calling Jesus Christ the Son of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the appearance of the glory of God in the midst of Israel. Paul would later speak of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

We need God's comfort? We need His presence in our desert-life? Let us go to Jesus Christ...

Not only does Scripture link Jesus firmly with the Glory of God, but it also links Him with the Exodus Isaiah promised as the hope for the people of God.

You recall the scene in the gospels about Jesus on a mountain, where Moses and Elijah appear. Jesus appeared in his Glory – his clothes became as bright as lightning.

When Moses and Elijah appeared, they spoke with Jesus about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. His departure: his death, resurrection and ascension.

The Greek word used for his departure that Luke uses, is literally: exodus. For the writers of the New Testament, Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension were the true exodus as promised by God: Jesus leads all mankind from sin, misery, hopelessness, into a life where God is present.

So the motifs of the Exodus and of the Glory of God find their full expression in Jesus Christ.

The desert where John preached was a place of preparation for the final act of God in history, and that final act was God's entrance into our history, into our lives, through Jesus Christ.

He is with us in our desert-trip of life as the comforting cloud of smoke and fire; God does not leave us alone. Even in the midst of the desert He offers us the foretaste of the life to come in His full presence.

What a comfort! He is near us, with us, around us, in us. We find Him again and again to be our hope and comfort for every day, even in the midst of dryness.

Yes we go through many times of wilderness in our life, and those times are real and rough. But they do not need to be the end of our hopes; the vacuum that misery creates in our heart, is so perfectly filled by the presence of Jesus Christ.

He is God with us, in our sufferings, in our pain. And eventually, he will take all that in his hands, and make all things totally new.

May I suggest that we use this period of Advent, to not deny our hurts, our troubles, but to be frank about them?

Instead of denial, it is much better to pray:

St John, Maadi 6 December 2008;
St Michael's Heliopolis, 5 Dec 2014

Lord God, you came to our dark world in Jesus Christ.
You are our Savior, our Shepherd, our Comfort, our Hope.
You know our humanness, our needs, our issues.
Please come again Lord into my problematic life, and
Lift me up.
Comfort me.
Encourage me - With your presence Lord.

Amen.