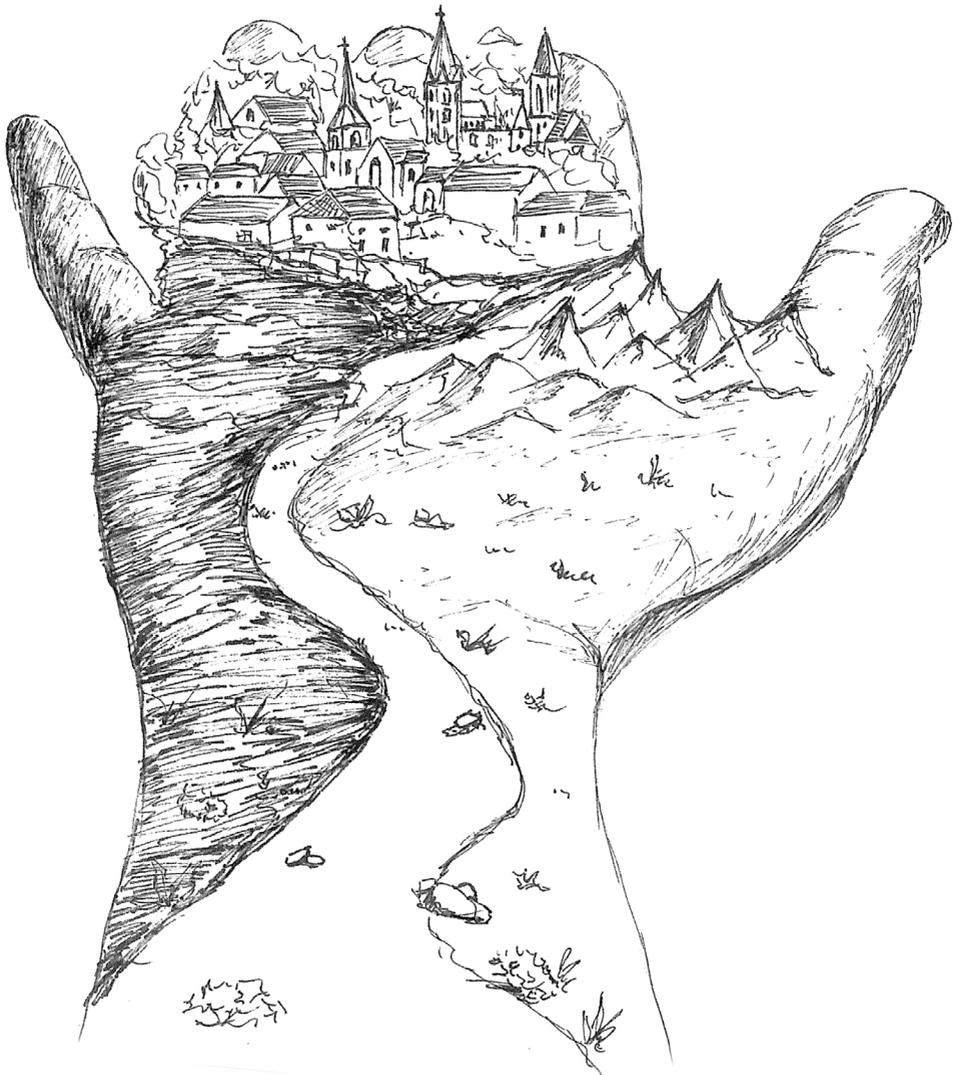


Jubilee Church

2020 Lent Devotions

Comfort my people | Isaiah 40-55



Foreword

The 2016 Lent devotional was written based on the contents of Isaiah 40-55, as we had intended for Isaiah as the best companion piece in understanding the Gospel of Mark. We were eager to get the task done and did not put in sufficient preparation to ensure our congregation was familiar with the book of Isaiah. This time round, four years later, as we read through the Gospel of Mark once again in our sermon series, we have chosen to revise some of our 2016 material and this will provide everyone with prior knowledge of Isaiah to help all of us on this journey through the Gospel of Mark.

This devotional material was adapted from the scholarship work of Dr John Goldingay, who structured his commentary on the book of Isaiah as follows:

Isaiah 1-12: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Ahaz

Isaiah 13-23: Messages about the nations surrounding Israel, with a reference to King Ahaz

Isaiah 24-27: Messages about the world, with no references to specific kings

Isaiah 28-39: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Hezekiah

Isaiah 40-55: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with references to King Cyrus

Isaiah 56-66: Messages about Judah and Jerusalem, with no references to specific kings

Ahaz was king of Judah from 736BC to 715BC. Hezekiah was king around 715BC to 686BC. Jerusalem fell to Babylon in 587BC which led to the exile of its leadership to Babylon. Cyrus was the king of Persia who took over the Babylonian empire in 539BC. He allowed the Judahites in Babylon to return home and rebuild the temple. The last chapters of the book make sense when understood in relation to the community in Judah after that event.

As these names and dates gradually become part of our memories, you will feel more and more at home when reading Isaiah. Regardless of whether you are familiar with what was being preached by the prophets, remember that these messages were God's spoken words to His people. And God's words are like rain or snow that will surely fall on the land; they will not be in vain.

For a long period of time, God's people paid little attention to the prophets, and hardly regarded them as spokesmen for God. It was much later, after they realised that they had made a serious mistake, that the people of God began to listen, collect all the messages that they remembered, and eventually put them into writing. Today, we have a Book, but perhaps, due to our unfamiliarity about the origin of the Book, we might not know how to read this Book. However, with every Advent and Lent, we at Jubilee Church intend to use the devotional materials to lead everyone on this journey together on this seemingly unfamiliar path, trusting that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us along on this "right path".

As we open the book of Isaiah, and take our first steps on this new path, may each of us turn our eyes upon the Lord and pay Him reverence.

Isaiah

40:1-2

Feb 26 (Day 1)

The Lord began to speak again, and spoke in volumes. While Chapters 1-39 contain both narration and words spoken by God, the contents of Chapters 40-55 are all God's spoken words. God expressed Himself through the experience of Israel; the history of the Israelites was inseparable from God. At the same time, through His acts for the Israelites, God conveyed His purpose to the world.

Before this, God's spoken words could be traced back to the time when He created the world. Back then, when Man decided to choose his own path and walked into "chaos", deviating from God's will, came the words which God spoke to Abram's family. God stated that a group of people from Abram's family who belonged to God would come forth, and this group of people would be the intermediary through which the world would receive God's blessings.

God's word was not in vain. After a few generations, the Abram family grew from a childless one to a huge tribe who resided in Egypt. When Pharaoh felt under threat and was determined to suppress the Israelites and enact genocidal policies, God's words came forth again. God commanded Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and head towards the fertile land of abundance which God had promised.

However, ever since entering the Promised Land, the Israelites did not live their lives according to God's word, leading to decadent behaviors and a lack of ethical societal norms.

Even with God's repeated exhortation, the Israelites did not repent. Hence, God decided to punish the people and allowed Israel to be destroyed. Destruction would bring along with it hopelessness, sorrow and extreme darkness. Could the Israelites withstand this? Would the people acknowledge that these were all acts of God? Was God punishing them? Was the Lord no longer able to bless and protect them, leading to their suffering? But there were also Israelites who were concerned about nothing else other than their survival in a foreign country and on alien land.

The passage we are reading today is about God's words to the Israelites who had lost their country and home. The circumstance which the people were facing was the situation of "darkness, chaos, and emptiness" which God Himself faced. How would God resolve the situation? Would God give up on these people who had abandoned Him?

The answers are found in God's words when He spoke again: "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem," and He told her that the days of war were over and behind her; "her sin has been paid for."

God "spoke" to Man again to restart his acts of creation.

Prayer:

God, you are the one who spoke to the people, I pray today that you will bring comfort and new creation to the darkness, emptiness and chaos in our lives.

Isaiah

40: 3-8

Feb 27 (Day 2)

God's judgment and discipline against His people was not the terminal point. Both judgment and discipline were meant to bring about renewal once again. God clearly expressed to His people that He was the one who doubly punished them. Since this punishment was from God, then one could possibly look forward to a revival from God. If the destruction of a nation was due to a chance event in history, or due to acts of Man in history, then God would have nothing to do with the disaster faced by the people, and hence, it would be impossible to ascertain if God still represented hope to the people.

Therefore, God began Chapter 1 by bringing charges against the people, and simultaneously proclaiming that He would act to discipline and punish the Israelites. This indeed came to pass; Jerusalem was destroyed, meaning that God's

temple also ended up in ruins. With the exception of the elderly and the people who were not chosen by the Babylonian army and still stayed in Jerusalem, many in their prime were held captive in the Babylonian kingdom. Of course, there were many others who had fled to the neighboring countries. The Jewish kingdom had been destroyed! How would one face the days ahead? All the physical structures and people associated with their faith in God were in total collapse! Would the entire belief in Yahweh be lost as a result? Would it be forgotten as a consequence?

How would God go about starting the rescue and renewal efforts? From what God said, we see that God decided to evoke the faith that the people had in Him once again! The revival had to move in the right direction, and the contents of the renewal had to be sound. God needed to be the subject of people's trust and confidence again! God needed to let the people know that at that point in time, He was the God that they could trust! God needed to convince the people to restore their faith in Him and their reverence of Him.

God began by having the people focus on Himself. God said:

The splendor of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it at the same time.

God once again revealed His glory, Man had to see God's glory once again (imagine the glory which God had revealed to Israel in the past, the gospels also recorded that Jesus revealed this glory). God did not explain in further details how He

revealed His majestic glory, He only persistently reaffirmed His steadfast promise to the people to reveal His glory once again. God said this was what he had predestined, and no power whatsoever would be able to prevent God from completing this!

Prayer:

The grass dries up, the flowers wither, but the promises of God are always fulfilled. Please revive and strengthen our faith. Lead us to do the good that you have prepared for us and reveal your glory in our church!

Isaiah

40: 9-11

Feb 28 (Day 3)

The passage on Day 1 allowed us to focus our attention on God's comfort, and reading today's passage permits us to look at the contents of God's message of comfort to the people with more clarity. The good news from God was targeted at the people of Jerusalem. The good news was that God would return to Jerusalem. Jerusalem would be the place from where God would command and exercise judgment.

Jerusalem is the focal point of the message of the book of Isaiah. Almost all of the entire book, from the beginning to the end, is a narrative of the situation in Jerusalem and all that the nation had encountered. Even from the day of its destruction, Jerusalem and God remained inseparable. Jerusalem would definitely be a pivotal place where God's future acts would be manifested. From the book of Isaiah, we see that God spoke to Jerusalem/

Zion. What actually did God want to do in Jerusalem? We have to be careful and mindful to ensure that what we understand is accurate and consistent with the scripture.

The good news which God wanted to proclaim was, God would return to Jerusalem to shepherd His people! Verse 11 utilized the image of a shepherd. In the Old Testament, the image of a shepherd signified that God is King, and He leads His people. Here the shepherd is herding flocks of sheep and guiding the ewe. In other words, Israelites would once again benefit from God's leadership and blessings in Jerusalem. This would certainly include the restoration of the relationship between the people and God, such that the people would be close to God, and walk with Him in their daily lives. The good news which God gave the people was this vision, an image of a shepherd herding sheep and ewe, and this image would become the hope of those facing the destruction of their nation, to tide them over the difficult situation at hand. It is worthy to note that God did not say how He would achieve His objective; God wanted to first convince the people as to why He would be able to realize what had been promised. Rebuilding the faith which the people had in God would be the critical starting point for revival and renewal.

Prayer:

Thank you God, for allowing us to see that you would be coming to Jerusalem to shepherd Your people. Your acts are what we fundamentally need. Come and open our eyes, allow us to not only see the difficulties in front of us but see that you are shepherding us, embracing us and leading us. You are building our trust in you, giving us a solid foundation for our revival and renewal.

Isaiah

40: 12-17

Feb 29 (Day 4)

The passage today is filled with question marks, and is one of the unique passages in the book of Isaiah. The three consecutive questions in the passage were not meant for the listeners of those days to contemplate and derive their own answers. In actuality, the design of the questions was meant to turn the focus of the listeners (including the readers today) to "who is God".

Who can use the palm of the hand to measure the volume of water? No one can. Only God Himself can measure the dimensions of the sky and the earth, the height of the mountains, the depths of the seas, and determine the amount of dust covering the lands. Only God Himself can decide what to do, and what needs to be done. Only God Himself can formulate and implement strategies and initiatives.

The phrase, "the nations are like a drop in the bucket," allows us

to see that all things on earth are insignificant in the eyes of the Lord. Nations do not carry any weight in God's eyes, as they are transient, and will disappear from history. God is transcendent, unmatched! Who exactly is God? From the perspective of the people at that time, what did He have to do with their situation?

Perhaps the destruction of their nation dealt a blow to the people and brought about many doubts, furthermore, the people living in foreign lands could also possibly be influenced by foreign cultures and religions. Perhaps God could no longer protect us? Is the Lord only one amongst many gods? When facing Israelites who could be in doubt, the prophet brought forth a powerful response: NO! God is unique, meaning God alone decides, and at the same time, God alone has the power to carry out His purpose! God does not need to consult the opinions of other advisors; on the contrary, God emphasizes His singularity and uniqueness, the focus of which was a guarantee to the people that what He had promised would definitely take place.

What seems like "water-cooler" theological questions are in fact God's starting point to resolve the life and death situation of the people. The reason is simple, if God were not this "unique", then the people would not have unique life prospects.

Prayer:

God, when we are troubled, never did it cross our minds that You are such a powerful and mighty God. Nations are like a drop in the bucket in Your eyes, so insignificant. Our hearts have opened wide.

Isaiah

40:18-31

Mar 2 (Day 5)

Have you ever experienced utter tiredness and helplessness? Under such circumstances, you can easily be confused by things with false pretenses. When the Israelites were sent into exile in Babylon, they encountered the ambitions, idols and worship styles of a superpower. In times of loneliness and vulnerability, they might relent and choose to go along with the ways of the Babylonians instead. Therefore, God had to again guide the people to get to know Him, and understand that waiting for a God like Him was worth it.

God pointed out that He did not wish to be understood using the usual religious frameworks of other religions. Firstly, He reminded them that He was the God who created the heavens and the earth. He is the God above all gods. He alone gives life and takes away life. Whenever they looked to the sky, the stars were displayed as His handiwork. Simply put, His

people must first recognize God as the great Creator and Sustainer of all that existed. Knowing God as the Creator is not for the purpose of knowing how the universe came about. (Although that is the question of the modern man, but not the question of the ancient scriptures.) Understanding and knowing what kind of Creator He was, was the first step to comprehending what God could do for them. Then they would learn how to build their trust in Him.

Secondly, God was speaking to "Jacob/ Israel", the forefather of the twelve tribes of Israel. The history of how God guided him throughout his life was the collective memory for all the Israelites! Didn't God walk with Jacob throughout his life? Didn't God journey with Jacob's descendants and settled the twelve tribes of Israel in the Promised Land? From the life of Jacob to the kingdom of Israel, God was present and participative. In using the name Jacob, the past, the present and the future of the Israelites were linked together. Therefore, God has the power and he is willing to accompany everyone through life as their God.

When the Israelites failed to see any improvements to the situation, or they had forgotten that they were punished to begin with, they started to question and complain to God instead of repenting. The Eternal Creator never gets tired and weary, with no limits to His wisdom and power to accomplish what He has promised (v. 28). Though He is the transcendent God, He still humbles Himself to be the hope of His people. The power He possesses will become their source of strength. 'Waiting' does not mean being passive; it is being focused

solely on God. When God regains His rightful place in their hearts as the one and only God, and in Him they build their trust, then they will be able to experience the reality of renewed strength and tirelessness. They shall walk with God and run and not be weary! Let us also learn to wait, and let our daily hope be based on our knowledge of God. God's strength is our strength.

Prayer:

Lord God, the Israelites needed to relearn about You. We too need to go through a similar process in order to relearn the secret of trusting You. I bring ... (difficulties currently facing) to you. I am waiting for you. I hope that you will draw me closer to you so that I can be renewed with strength!

Isaiah

41: 1-8

Mar 3 (Day 6)

When faced with turbulent situations in life, there might be those who would be frantic and anxious, while there might be others who would try to act tough. Such a situation occurred in Isaiah's world as well. King Cyrus of the Persian Empire had risen in power in the East, using his might to overwhelm other ancient Near Eastern nations. This caused the people to feel scared and shocked. The world could only tremble in fear when faced with such a situation, as they were ignorant of any deeper meaning as to why it was taking place. Others might choose to stay strong by encouraging and spurring on one another, while nailing down their toppling idols (v.6-7). Was this the only way out?

In the ancient Near East, all the people believed in gods, and there were many gods. Was the LORD merely just one of them? Of course not! God spoke to the nations, inviting

them to a debate, and proclaimed Himself as the real influencer of world affairs. In fact, King Cyrus was called to power by God. God pointed out that such a scenario also happened in the past. God was the reason for the beginning of things that happened; he could shape the situation and control its rise and fall. In facing such a unique and special God, nations could only remain silent as they were not able to deny that God was God indeed.

Perhaps the world could only have such reactions. What about the Israelites? God addressed the Israelites directly, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend" (verse 8). God clearly pointed out that the Israelites were chosen to manifest God's power and glory. Though the Israelites were disciplined and punished by God, they were still chosen by Him. They were His servants, the descendants of His friend Abraham, the ones whom God journeyed with, and the ones whom God helped and strengthened. Therefore, they did not need to be frantic and anxious, or act tough. Instead, they should understand their own identity, and use this as their support and hope. We should do the same. Today, in the midst of turbulent trade wars and economic uncertainties, we still have our identity in the kingdom of heaven. Even though there are uncertainties in world affairs, the people who belong to the kingdom of heaven are able to shine wherever they are.

Prayer:

Lord God, when you speak, we want to listen! You support and strengthen us, and we want the world to know that you are the God of all situations.

Remark: The ancient Near East is one of the origins of early civilization. It covers the regions of the current Mid-East area, including Mesopotamia (now Iraq), ancient Egypt, ancient Iran (Elam, Medes, Parthian and Old Persian), Minor Asia (now Turkey and Armenia), Levant (now Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian state and Jordan), Malta and the Arabian Peninsula.

Isaiah

41:8-20

Mar 4 (Day 7)

When your life hits rock bottom, you need steady support. When the Israelites were faced with troubles, they might have felt worthless like a 'worm' but they still had a 'redeemer' to depend on (v.14). (With reference to Leviticus 25:25, "If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.") Unlike those from other nations who became fearful from the changes that were taking place, the Israelites were not because they knew that God was behind what was happening (v.2). The Israelites did not need to depend on powerless idols. On the contrary, God was determined to make the Israelites aware of, understand and recognize what God had created.

Wasn't their ancestor Abraham called by God from the East too? God's ability to create new prospects and situations was truly beyond doubt.

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (verse 10). God wanted to change the situation that the Israelites were in so that they were no longer despised and oppressed. God would help the poor and suffering who prayed to Him; He would not leave them. But wouldn't it be futile to resist when trapped under the rule of the strong Babylonian empire? However, God declared, "All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced" (verse 11). The insufferably arrogant Babylon which was all powerful lost its supremacy in the blink of an eye. The miraculous nature of such a change can be visualized using the image of a bleak and boundless desert transforming into an orchard. Whether it is a large mountain being destroyed into nothingness or a nation transformed from despair to new life, God can achieve what is deemed as impossible.

"But you will rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel", "The poor and needy ... But I the Lord will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them" (verses 16-17). The Israelites would experience God's salvation and revival. They were abandoned by God, punished by God but would become the subject of His grace. The Israelites would delight in God and glorify Him. God announced 'that the hand of the Lord has done this, and God will make things happen using his power' (verse.20).

Prayer:

Thank you God for not leaving your people; hence, we will not be scared because you are here with us and you will help us; you can turn despair into hope. May we understand and recognize your works.

Isaiah

41:21-29

Mar 5 (Day 8)

What does a “true God” mean? This question cannot be answered with one or two devotionals. But today’s passage can address two issues regarding this topic.

First, the true God can only be the God who created the world and guided history. In the passage, God questioned the Babylonian gods. Could they interpret the present situation? Could they predict the future? In the events that happened, what roles did they play?

The Old Testament prophets had prophesied about the future many times, including the rise and fall of their nation and others. Although the Babylonian priests claimed that it was their god Marduk who led the Persian king Cyrus to attack them as punishment, it was claimed only after their country was attacked by the Persians. In other words, it was an afterthought. This clearly addressed the earlier questions from the

prophet: the Babylonian gods could not do it! They failed to interpret or predict anything. Only God is the true God who determines the future, and only His prophets can foretell the future.

Secondly, the true God is like a devoted potter, fully intending to shape clay into usable vessels; “like a potter treading the clay” (verse 25; See Jeremiah 18; Isaiah 29:13-16) describes the tragic fate of the imminent destruction of Babylon. “Treading the clay” refers to God’s servant Cyrus, but it can also refer to God’s methods. To tread clay is to make it formless, so that it can be reshaped into vessels. The process of shaping is varied and dynamic, and similarly, God used many different ways to mold the Israelites and humanity. Whether through blessing, or severe discipline (like Cyrus crushing the self-deifying Babylon; or in the earlier days, the exile of Israel and Judah), God continually molded humanity, till they lived out the divine will of their creation.

Simply put, our lives must turn towards God, whether it is Israel or Babylon of the past, or us today. God has never given up, nor has He ceased his work of molding humanity.

Reflection:

In this Lent period, are we ready for God to renew our lives, so that we may be vessels pleasing to God?

Isaiah

42:1-9

Mar 6 (Day 9)

“I have placed my spirit on him; he will make just decrees for the nations.” These words describe the Servant of the Lord. God’s servant would spread God’s name in the nations and establish his justice (42:1,6-7). This was because Cyrus’ army would make people in the neighboring countries live in fear. The prophet emphasized that they feared because they knew that their gods could not fight nor protect them, resulting in them becoming victims.

Though these Gentiles might be like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick (v.3), they were also created by God and given life. God would extend His merciful hand to them through his servant, so that they might experience His faithfulness and love.

But based on the descriptions of the Bible, one might be worried. Israel-Jacob as a servant was described as deaf and blind, a lost servant in need of guidance. How would a

servant as weak as the Gentiles fulfill such a prophecy? As we read on, we shall see God’s righteousness and mercy.

Verses 5 to 9 prophesied that the servant would bless the nations, verse 6 said it would be fulfilled. “I, the Lord, ... make you a covenant mediator for people, and a light to the nations.” This says that the faithful God would restore relations with Israel, so that they might be blessed, to become a mediator, and be a witness to the happiness of a covenant with God. This would spur all to seek God.

God’s willingness to use a weak servant to bless the people brings enlightenment to our Lenten reflection. Lent focuses on penitential prayer because of the weakness of believers. Today’s reflection reaffirms that:

- God is willing to use those who are weak to bless others;
- God willingly restores relations with His servants, so that they may bless others as mediators.

This also reminds us that in the period of Lent, we must remember the death and resurrection in Christ of our spiritual lives through baptism (Baptismal spirituality). Lent reminds us to be constantly in union with Christ.

Prayer:

Loving Father, continue to stretch out your hands to us, daily. Continue to support us, guard us and adjust the order of our lives. Help us to be one with you, and be able to lean on you so that we can be channels of blessing for others, and use our lives to influence other lives.

Isaiah

42:10-17

Mon 7 (Day 10)

When Christians are in a dilemma, they often pray to God for wisdom and a way out. But have you wondered if God ever had times of dilemma?

The one who “have been inactive for a long time; kept quiet and held back” (verse 14) is referring to God. God also restrained Himself into inactivity and quietness at times, because when God acts, “I will make the trees on the mountains and hills wither up; I will dry up all their vegetation.” (verse 15), there will be killing that leads to **death**. “I will lead the blind along an unfamiliar way; ... I will turn the darkness in front of them into light, and level out the rough ground.” (verse 16) This is how saving the oppressed and the helpless will lead to **life**. To do the latter, there must first be action against the former, and God was in a dilemma. Though God was willing to save the oppressed and the helpless, even to

sacrifice Himself as ransom, He could not bear to end the lives of those who were evil. This shows God’s merciful heart, like a parent to a child.

But this dilemma, holding back and waiting can only happen up to a certain point, He must eventually redress the wronged. When God’s fervor was displayed, two imageries appeared, like a warrior (verse 13) and like a woman in labor (verse 14). Through shouts, yells and groans, he upheld justice for the persecuted.

Though there were many instances of God in battle in the Old Testament, such as in Exodus or the entrance into Canaan, but because the biblical records spanned many generations, many back then had yet to see God in battle. Thus, it seemed that God was often in a state of inactivity. But today’s passage indicates that God was not slow or unapproachable, or not listening to the pleas of those waiting for salvation.

Our times are filled with chaos and injustice, do we pray for the wronged? God hears the prayers of his children.

Prayer:

God, you are willing to listen. I want to pray for ... (a wronged person or people/group). I pray for your vindication upon them.

Isaiah

42:18-25

Mon 9 (Day 11)

The Israelites who were in exile in Babylon were truly deaf and blind. Deafness refers to their unwillingness to listen, and blindness refers to their foolishness. "But these people are looted and plundered; all of them are trapped in pits and held captive in prisons. They were carried away as loot with no one to rescue them." (v.22) You would think that such experiences would compel them into reflection – shouldn't dark times motivate them to long for the light? But they were truly deaf and blind. Babylon was facing an imminent disaster, and yet they did not think about turning towards God, nor seeking His intentions or future plans.

In the past, when God proclaimed His judgement upon them, and followed up with His plans of salvation, these were deliberate ways to demonstrate that "The Lord wanted to exhibit his justice by magnifying his law and displaying it."(v.21) If they

were to consider all these revelations and works carefully, they would understand God's wisdom pertaining to the situation in the world, God's ways, and how He carried out His will. God was willing to reveal himself, so that Man might marvel at His wisdom and His ways.

But God's people chose to ignore them. From the establishment of the kingdom to its downfall, prophets were sent to instruct them, but "they refused to follow his commands; they disobeyed his law." (v.24) They persisted in their blindness and were unrepentant. Despite all the troubles, they failed to know God. Alas, if they wallowed in their obduracy, they would not see the light. This was not to say that God gave up on them, but rather that all these engineered dramatic turns of events could not guide them to return to God. But God still sent his prophets to awaken them, because they remained "My servant ... my messenger ... my covenant partner" (v.19) to God. They were supposed to be the light to the nations. But because they were deaf and blind, they went against their calling. But it was not yet too late. If they would only listen attentively and pay attention (v.23), their fortunes could still transform.

Prayer:

God, your people are deaf and blind, how worried you must be! Help us to come to a realization earlier and return quickly. Help me in (a matter that you need to turn back in) so that I will not continue sticking to a wrong course but search for your decree and listen to your teachings. I hope that the blind can see and the deaf can hear that you are God!

Isaiah

43:1-7

Mar 10 (Day 12)

Israel was precious to God. 'I have handed over Egypt as a ransom price, Ethiopia and Seba in place of you' (v.3). Israel's precious value caused God to trade these territories for them, handing them over to Pharaoh. This ransom was like the liberation price for a slave. God paid a heavy price to bring them back. God said: 'Since you are precious and special in my sight, and I love you, I will hand over people in place of you, nations in place of your life' (v.4). Now, God was making the same sacrifice to deliver them from exile, it also meant that the Israelites belonged to God.

However, let us not see this "belonging" in commercial terms. The "servant-master" relationship between God and Israel was one of mutual commitment and respect. God as the master had His responsibilities towards the servant - He was the one the servant depended on. The servant

should respect the master, but the master ought to respect the servant as well. Since the master once rescued the servant from deep trouble, it was a commitment to the level of "When you pass through the waters, I am with you; when you pass through the streams, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not harm you." (v.2) God would extend His hand to help the servant through thick and thin.

As Israel's deliverer, God would also gather back the dispersed. One can only imagine how many races had vanished without a trace, lost in the annals of history. It was God's determination that preserved Israel. Even from the extreme north to the far end of the south, God would draw them back. We must especially note the mention of "daughters" (verse 6). They shall return, just like the sons. We are comforted knowing that everyone was valued. Though the restoration of the community as a whole was important, the community was also the sum of its individuals, and every single one was equally important. Verse 7 states "everyone who belongs to me". Indeed, every single one must return to God's will in His creation and complete His calling in glory.

Prayer:

God, thank you for saying these precious words to Israel. Thank you for valuing your people. I pray that you will help us truly know that we belong to you, as we were created for your glory. May this knowledge change our lives by giving us the strength to live out our calling.

Isaiah

43:8-13

Man 11 (Day 13)

To appreciate today's passage, let us learn about its historical context. The people of Israel had an important role, and that was to be God's witnesses (v.10,12). But what did that mean? In those days, the way the ancient religions interacted was similar to disputing parties in a courtroom. Whenever a major event happened, the topics of dispute would be who was responsible and who was in control. During a dispute, witnesses played the key role of providing testimonies for the case. In this case, the matter of dispute was: who was in control of history? Who could influence the situation? Who was the true God? Babylon would of course claim that their god was manipulating everything. So, God summoned Israel to court, and with their own experiences, they could provide evidential testimony to prove the contrary. The strongest testimony would be Babylon's destruction by the

Persians, for that was God's salvation plan for Israel. And events happened as foretold. Israel therefore had the potential to become a unique witness, who could testify to the true reasons that led to these events, and prove that it was their God who was in control. If Israel had eyes and ears, they only had to listen to the prophecies and observe the events in order to fulfill their role perfectly. The Babylonians would have had no room to argue otherwise.

Unfortunately, Israel was deaf and blind. They did not listen to the prophets, nor cared about God's unfolding plans. It looked like God would have to give up on the case, or find other witnesses. Surely God would not consider relying on these deaf and blind witnesses for their testimonies, would He? Because that would make Him a laughing stock. But it appeared that God still had hope for Israel. It all boiled down to the servant-master relationship. God must be committed to this servant to enable him to fulfill his mission. In the end, this testimony would not just be for witnessing to the world; more importantly, Israel itself would be moved by its own testimony. Because of God's deeds, they would acknowledge God once again, and believe in Him as their one true God.

Prayer:

God, you use ordinary men as your witnesses. Your invitation moves us. We are willing to trust in you and be your witness. Please help us to transform our lives so that we can complete your mission.

Isaiah

43:14-21

Mar 12 (Day 14)

The Exodus event was the wondrous act of God. He described Himself as personally leading His people across the Red Sea and eliminating the pursuing enemies. The very mention of these events would help in encouraging the Israelites, for just as how salvation and victory were accomplished in the past, similar events now appear possible as well. However, God said, "Don't remember these earlier events; don't recall these former events." (v.18) God said this because he was about to act again, and another wondrous act was about to happen. Even though the past events were great and memorable, but these people were about to experience a similar event for themselves, hence there was no need to dwell on the past. The past events helped in affirming their faith in God's power, but if they led the Israelites into thinking that God was only powerful and active in the past, then

these should be forgotten so that they would instead anticipate God's great works in their future.

The promises from the prophets were often repeats of God's past promises. Even though these promises were from the past, God was still prompted by them to act in new ways. In the process of renewal, a new exodus, a new covenant, a new inheritance of land, a new king, a new Jerusalem, a new Temple, and even a new heaven and a new earth would be realized. These descriptions of God's new acts might resemble the past, but such forms of revelation were because of epistemological reasons. God had to use what the people could comprehend to get them to imagine what would happen in the future.

God expressed that these things would take place "for your sake" (v.14). In the past, for the pursuing Egyptian soldiers to lose all hope, God had to wipe them out. The Babylonians would suffer the same fate in this current case. This act of God would be a revelation to His people, and a proclamation to the world. To his people, He stated, "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the one who created Israel, your King." (v.15) To the world, He declared, "these are the people whom I formed for myself, so they might praise me." (v.21)

Prayer:

God, you did wondrous things in the past, and today you shall do the same! I entrust all my problems/obstacles to you. Do something new in all this. I want to proclaim your goodness.

Isaiah

43:22-28

Mar 13 (Day 15)

When God's people were living in captivity, God spoke to them through His prophet, "Why did you not call upon me?"

"Seeking God" in those days is vastly different from our notion of "searching frantically" for someone. From the rise of the kingdom until its fall, God did not distance Himself from His people, nor make it inconvenient or troublesome for them to seek Him. The root of the problem laid with the Israelites – they did not turn to the LORD. In this passage, the LORD said that He had never burdened His people with sacrifices. On the contrary, it was the people who had burdened and wearied Him (v.24). When the Israelites were left stranded in a foreign land, they thought that the LORD had broken all ties with them. Contrary to their beliefs, the LORD continued to care for His people and even questioned them, "Why have you not approached me for help? Have

you made me grown weary of you?" (v.22). In what ways had the Israelites wearied the LORD? Verse 24 tells us, "with their sins". These words should make us ashamed of ourselves. We were created to walk right beside our Creator, but we have turned away from Him and grieved Him with our sins. We have given the Creator undue stress and caused Him to be weary.

"I, yes I am the one who blots out your transgressions for my own sake; I will not remember your sins." We are astonished at the phrase, "for my own sake." Throughout their history, God's people were neither commendable in their ethics, nor single-minded and wholeheartedly committed to their religion, to a point where it was no longer justifiable for the LORD to regard them as His people. As a matter of fact, the Israelites were extremely weak in moral conduct and sloppy in their worship. However, all these factors did not lead God to terminate His covenantal-relationship with the people. It was "for His own sake" that the LORD refused to give up on the people.

However, even when the LORD had not chosen to break up with His people, did He continue the covenantal-relationship with a heart of bitterness and resentment? On second thought, does the LORD not have the right to be angry and resentful towards His own people? What is recorded in verse 25 will shatter our wrong impression of God, "I... (will) blot out your transgressions ...; I will not remember your sins." Such an expression of forgiveness might cause others to feel guilty and ashamed, but to us, it is undoubtedly a delightful piece of good news.

Prayer:

O, LORD, I am just like the Israelites who have failed to seek you. However, You are willing to forgive my sins and wrongdoings for Your own sake. Thank you, LORD. I hope that whenever I pray, I can grow closer to you and strengthen my relationship with you. I also want to surrender my weaknesses, my limitations and shortcomings to you. I pray that in my weakness, you will manifest your fullness.

Isaiah

44:1-8

Mar 14 (Day 16)

Before we read this awe-inspiring passage in Isaiah 44, we need to review Isaiah 43:28, because in that text, God said, “(I will) deliver Jacob to utter destruction”. The word “destruction” is a term that invokes a sense of horror in us. For example, Achan faced destruction because he did not obey the instruction of the LORD (Joshua 7). Should Jacob be utterly destroyed, there would be no remnant left of his line. If that happened, what would become of God’s promise to Abraham? However, in the following passage 44:1-5, we read that the LORD declared that He would revive Israel. Like a caring Father, God addressed Israel by a personal title “my servant whom I have chosen” (v.1). (In today’s context, the term “ambassador” is probably a better alternative.) Once again, the LORD addressed His people as “Israel”, a name that He had bestowed on His people. In the past, the LORD

had delivered Israel from slavery; now the same LORD was calling for Israel to be His people again. God would irrigate their dry land with flowing streams.

The desert is a strange and wondrous place. Should a misty storm pass over it, the seeds that were buried beneath the drought-stricken land would sprout up overnight. Like magic, a bed of flowers would bloom suddenly, covering an area of many square kilometers instantly. God is able to water the desert, cause streams to flow through it, make flowers bloom on barren land, and enable plants to flourish – such a sight is beyond description. That which occurs in a natural landscape can also happen in the lives of God’s people. The LORD said that He would pour out His Spirit on the descendants of Israel. This means that the current generation of Israelites would not encounter the horror that God had declared. They were expected to pass on the LORD’s warning and assurance so that every generation would cherish the hope – the outpouring of the Spirit of the LORD.

Verse 5 expresses the intimate relationship between the LORD and His people: In the past, it was the LORD who declared Israel to be His people on Mt. Sinai; now it was the people who confessed, “We belong to the LORD.” What a beautiful and heart-warming scene.

Prayer:

God, thank you for pouring out your Spirit unto us, so that we can belong to you. Help us to be more sensitive towards the guidance of the holy spirit every day, that we will love to read your words more, better understand your intentions, and love getting closer to you through prayer, so that our hearts can be renewed, our lives bear the fruit of the spirit and we can be your witnesses in our daily lives.

Isaiah

44:9-23

Mon 16 (Day 17)

It is incredible that God's people had forgotten about Him. And even with these Israelites, God spoke intently to them, "You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?" (44:8) In verses 9-17, God let them reflect on what they had seen over the years. There was no lack of craftsmen in their midst, people who would use a piece of wood to craft idols, another piece to burn and keep warm, and another piece to roast meat. These same people would turn to the idol made out of their own hands and say, "Save me; you are my god". Verses 18-20 indicate that they did these out of complete ignorance. Their God who had been observing them closely for a long period of time could see that they had come to a dead end, and there was no salvation ahead.

The turning point in their lives came when God called these ignorant and fallen people "Jacob" and "Israel",

which was their ancestor's name. God had always remembered Jacob, who later was named Israel. Through the generations, and up to this current generation of the descendants of Jacob, God once again called on them lovingly, "Israel, you are my servant". No doubt they were far from perfect, but God who could see the future would bring about a huge change. God saw that they had fallen prey to the temptations of false gods, but nothing was impossible for God. He could sweep away their offenses as easily as dust. What could possibly be difficult for God who created the heavens and the earth? The most crucial part is, "Return to me" - this was a call of love. God had seen them running after false gods and this caused Him heartache and rage, but now God remembered His promise to Jacob. He was willing to redeem them, and willing to disregard their offenses.

Without such a God who calls out to us, who can we turn to in life? If God was willing to call out to Israel at their worst, and address them as "my servant", how much more will He also speak to us who have been baptized in Christ? If our brothers have gone down the wrong path, should we not continue to pray, seek the opportunity to counsel, and wait patiently for their return? For God is our redeemer.

Prayer:

God we have heard your voice, and this has moved our hearts! God, I acknowledge that I do not love you enough, I do not love my brothers and sisters enough, I do not love others as I love myself. Please erase my sins and allow me to turn back to you so that I can love you more, have a greater yearning to follow your teachings and a bigger desire to guard the holiness and truth in my heart. At the same time, I want to constantly pray for my brothers and sisters (names of those who you're praying for) who have strayed away from you, till all of us are gathered under your wing once again.

Isaiah

44: 24-28

Mon 17 (Day 18)

With the demise of the Kingdom of Judah, the country's elite and leaders were sent into exile in Babylon. For 50 years under the harsh rule of the Babylonians, the Jews were disheartened and their dreams of restoring their kingdom had vanished.

Nonetheless, God was on the move! But the task of awakening His people's desire to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple seemed formidable. How was God going to change the people's mindset and remind them that all was possible in Him?

First, through the prophet, God reminded the people that He was the Creator - even up to that very moment. As God described how He created heaven and earth, He had also shown Himself to be the protector. The word "protector" originally meant "Redeemer." For God to protect His people was to redeem them from their plight. Since God was the Creator, He could "create" a new situation in a

desperate situation. Remember how He parted the Red Sea?

God challenged His people, "Were they going to continue to believe those diviners or so-called "wise men" (v.25)? Or would they trust in the decree and proclamation of the Prophet? Remember that this was not a futile hope. The promise of God's redemption stemmed from His power to create (v.24). What God was about to do would be beyond their imagination. If the Jews had understood this, they would have seen beyond what was in front of them and caught a glimpse of what God had in store for them.

God's plan was indeed fascinating. He went so far as to accomplish His will with a Gentile - King Cyrus, whom God said was His shepherd (v.28). King Cyrus built the Persian Empire and his kingdom included all civilized nations of the ancient Near East, which spanned from the west of Hellespont to the east of Indus. The size of his kingdom was unprecedented. But just like Moses and David, who were God's servants and instruments, God used him to redeem His people, thus accomplishing a seemingly impossible task. He is the God beyond our imagination.

Prayer:

God, your proclamation amazes us.
Your way awes us.

Today, we again entrust our
(Vision/Ministry/Service/Purpose)
to you, we seek your power and leadership. We firmly believe that you can and want to create a new situation in times of despair. When the time is right, you will accomplish your will, and it will be beyond our imagination.

Isaiah

45: 1-8

Man 18 (Day 19)

God used Cyrus, a Persian King, to fulfill His will in judging Babylon and redeeming the Jews. He used one superpower to eliminate another superpower. Through the eyes of history, that was the result of a fierce fight for regional supremacy. But God revealed to us that He was the one behind Cyrus and He was the one who caused all the events to happen. Twice, in the scriptures, God said, "though you have not acknowledged me" (v.4-5). Cyrus might have thought that he was creating his own kingdom, but he was merely an instrument that God used to fulfill His plan. Cyrus' successes and victories were actually God's doing. God declared that He was the one and only God.

In the eyes of the people at that time, every nation had their own gods. The assumption would be that the exiled Jewish people belonged to a nation with a god that failed. But God turned that view upside down with His

marvelous doing, calming the storm and the winds. The notion of the one and only God is not about finding out how many gods there are, but recognizing the true God who reigns and is in total control. It was for the Jews to acknowledge that and worship God as the one true God. People of all nations would also recognize the God of the "Great I am" through His salvation and history-changing ways.

Of course, recognizing God's sovereignty may cause us to inevitably attribute all things, good and bad, to Him. "I form the light, and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." (v.7) This does not mean that God would carry out evil deeds but affirms the fact that God is in all things, good and bad. Even bad things, such as a disaster, can be used by God according to His will. The rise and fall of nations also happen in accordance with His will. So, let us be grateful to this one and only God Almighty for His will is, "You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it." (v.8)

Prayer:

God, help us to realize that in all things, you are the God of history. From today onwards, I want to see a different world, a world that is filled with your great power. Everything is done according to your will, hence, whenever I do not understand what is happening, I will pray for your mercy and you will bring salvation. In my daily life, I want to walk with you and be a vessel for you. Bless me with thoughts of being with you, that the words I speak are according to your will, and the works of my hands are done in partnership with you.

Isaiah

45: 9 - 13

Mar 19 (Day 20)

It is a fact that God commissioned Cyrus to accomplish His will. This was a very controversial action indeed and Cyrus' name was only mentioned towards the end of Chapter 44 even though God started speaking from Chapter 40 onwards. This delayed revelation was deliberate, perhaps the prophet had a very different way of presenting his ideas. On one hand, Israel felt that they had been abandoned by God for 50 years; on the other hand, they experienced firsthand the violence of Assyria and Babylon, and were therefore skeptical about Persia. However, the most difficult part was to accept a Gentile as God's anointed shepherd instead of a descendent of David. How did Isaiah convince them? By reminding them that God was irrefutably God.

The prophet emphasized that if they argued against God's revelation, it would mean that they were against God Himself. His thoughts are

different from our thoughts; His ways are different from our ways. Therefore, the one who argues with his Creator is like clay questioning the potter (v.9), or like the child challenging the parents (v.10). Can't God discipline His own children? Can't the potter shape the clay as he wishes? Since God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth (v.12), He was sovereign in His judgment on the Babylonians and in the restoration of the Israelites. We may be uncertain about the destiny of a piece of clay, just like we are unsure about the future of a growing child. Just as the intention of the potter is to transform clay into a worthy and useful vessel, so God continues to mold and shape such that there will always be the possibility of the clay becoming a special vessel. History is this clay, and so is Man. No matter Jews or Gentiles, noble or lowly, all are like clay in God's all-powerful hands.

Cyrus might not match the ideals of the Jews, be it politically, racially or in religious beliefs. To the Jews, such a choice might even appear ridiculous. However, the prophet solemnly reminded them of the importance of God's sovereignty and at the same time, challenged them to expand their perspectives. "How dare you question me about my children! How dare you tell me what to do with the work of my hands!" (v.11) Think about it. Cyrus was God's child too. Cyrus' achievement was also God's accomplishment. God's deeds are wonderful and immeasurable by human ways.

Prayer:

God, we often argue with you and forget how great you are. Your hands stretched out the sky and created the universe. We humbly acknowledge that you are the Divine Potter and can do whatever you want with us, the clay. Please expand our horizons, help us let go of our prejudices. I give to you ... (things/people that I don't understand). Help me to wait quietly and give me a new perspective so that I can understand your wonderful works.

Isaiah

45:14-25

Mar 20 (Day 21)

The achievements of Cyrus included not only destroying the Babylonians but also defeating the Egyptians and her allies.

The relationship between Egypt and Israel go way back. Sometimes they were intimate neighbors, other times deadly rivals. When Judah was weakening and eventually came to an end, all Egypt offered were empty promises. And now, the success of Cyrus was forcing Egypt and her allies to bow down before him.

Outwardly, the victor of the war seemed to be Cyrus the Persian, but the truth was: it was God who ruled history. In the plan to restore Jerusalem, these countries all came to offer their aid. They came not to worship King Cyrus but to worship the glorified Holy City of the end times.

Therefore, such a pronouncement meant that the nations would worship the LORD.

The great redemptive work of God led the nations to declare that "He has no peer. There is no other God!" (v.14). His action itself was a form of self-revelation. His deeds were so wonderful and so beyond comprehension that the nations could only be in awe of the God who was hidden beyond their imagination and was now manifested in His greatness. To the despondent Jews, such a revelation could also be a challenge: in the future, nations would have no choice but to acknowledge the magnificent acts of God. How about themselves? Could they also recognize this was the work of the Almighty God?

Although the Jews were humiliated by the destruction of their country, but in time to come, would they be able to draw courage from God and lift their heads high again? "All the descendants of Israel will be vindicated by the LORD and will boast in Him." (v. 25). The days of shame would come to pass and the days of glory shall come. Other nations depended on their own idols, and "they will be ashamed and embarrassed; those who fashion idols will be humiliated." (v.16). Jews must have faith in their true and reliable Deliverer, the LORD. The nations will have to face the truth one day, that there is no other God like Him. "I have no peer, there is no God but me." (verse 21).

Prayer:

LORD, there is no other God but you. We and all the nations will bow before you and worship you alone. People from the ends of the earth who look up to you will be saved. God, I want to look to you daily and worship you, please rescue me from all my troubles so that I can always rejoice, constantly pray, give thanks in all things, and seek you in all situations.

Isaiah

46: 1-2:

47: 1-15

Mar 21 (Day 22)

Verses 1 and 2 in Isaiah 46 inevitably perplex the reader as to what is being conveyed.

Bel and Nebo were both Babylonian deities. When the victory flag of Cyrus was raised high, their statues fell together with the kingdom of Babylon in defeat and destruction. With heads hung low, tied to beasts of burden and taken away in captivity, they resembled the people of Judah who, with their heads bent low, were crushed by the Babylonian army during the fall of the city of Jerusalem. Although Judah was once destroyed by the mighty Babylonians, God still spoke through the prophets to His people, telling them that the idols, worshipped by the victors, would one day be in bondage too.

Chapter 47 reveals the life of the Babylonian princess who had a highly privileged upbringing. The splendor and great wealth of royalty as well as the oppressive living conditions of the ordinary people were all described

vividly. The natives of Babylon had enjoyed unrivaled economic standards. The country itself had limited resources but relied heavily on trade and exchange, and hence had acquired an endless supply of resources from other lands. However, with the country now defeated, the people were made to take on menial tasks performed in the past by their lowly servants, such as milling for flour (v.2), wading across rivers, and getting themselves wet, much like those who had served them before. Formerly well regarded in the international arena for their political prowess, economic development and their cultural heritage, Babylon no longer enjoyed any of that as they ceased to be a superpower. Downtrodden, they could only choose to be silent (v.5). In the hour of their unknowing, the calamity had befallen them (v.11) and they found no escape route. There was only endless shame and silence.

All these words were spoken for Israel. In their circumstances, it was difficult to imagine that the Babylonian masters who were once tyrannical in their treatment would themselves be reduced to do a servant's work, and that they would lose their status in the international arena. Yet this was the way God worked through the prophets — so that His people could imagine the unimaginable and have their hope restored in them.

Prayer:

Lord, our imagination is insufficient. We are unable to go beyond the trappings of today to see that they too will lose prominence in the world. Please help train our imagination like how you trained the Israelites then. You have entrusted us with your kingdom and your gospel. Your kingdom is not one of hegemony but one that will be saved forever. Please help our imagination take flight and lead us to listen to your call, to follow your lead, to fly over the limits we see and to give you our vision and mission.

Isaiah

46: 3-13

Mar 23 (Day 23)

Israel had gone through the humiliation of captivity, yet God who loved His people had never forgotten them. Instead, God's voice was unwavering as He spoke, "With whom do you compare me? Tell me, who is like me that he can be compared with me?" This was not the first time these words were uttered. In fact, since the time of Moses, God had said likewise (Deuteronomy 4: 32-36), and once again, He was saying this to His people. Humans are forgetful, but God is constantly present. He had witnessed the passing of generation after generation of Israelites, from when they were like a child cared for by Him, till the present, having developed into a nation, and even when they lost their nationhood, God said he had been with them all the way (v. 3 - 4), and He would deliver them.

When Babylon and Persia were caught in the ultimate decisive battle, God announced through the prophet,

"As I have said, so it needs to be completed. What I have purposed has to be done." (v.11) Perhaps, in the eyes of Cyrus, his plan was to defeat the lofty Babylonian empire. But in God's eyes, Cyrus was his right-hand general and through Cyrus, He would judge Babylon. Furthermore, He would perform things that were marvelous and wonderful for his people. The acts of God are mysterious and great. Before these acts were revealed, God spoke about them and after they were completed, His people recognized them as done and attributed them to God (v.10).

Man's experiences of God in history builds up gradually, like the layers of bricks in buildings. These form our understanding of the sovereign and omnipotent God. God is the Lord of history — not a single country can say that they are indomitable; no matter how successful or powerful they are, they are nothing in the eyes of God, and they merely operate within the space and time allotted to them. This too is the Creator we know.

Prayer:

God, your acts are mysterious: when you speak them, they will be done. Today, we do things according to your will. Right now, we might not necessarily see your influence but you have already sown the seeds in eternity and when the time is right, the seeds will germinate.

Isaiah

48:1-11

Mon 24 (Day 24)

This entire passage is a speech from the Lord, addressing the family of Jacob, Israel, and the descendants of Judah.

From the perspective of God, they were the people of God who took oaths in the name of the Lord, but did not act in the honest and just manner of the Lord (v.1). In other words, they did not live in the way of the Lord. Though they proclaimed themselves as residents of the Holy city, and claimed to trust in the Lord, but their practices were contrary. The irony was that the Lord knew how stubborn they were, their neck muscles were like iron, and their foreheads were like bronze. Such descriptions reflected their rebellious nature, and this the Lord knew from the beginning and had announced it to them beforehand.

It would be common sense to avoid such stubborn people, yet even though the Lord had predicted their stubbornness, He still went ahead

with His plan to elect them as His Holy people. Despite their rebellion and deceitful behavior, He stuck to them, for the Lord is Holy, He is different from other idols. Though they broke His heart, He wanted to refine them (v.10). For the sake of His name, He would not give up, nor allow His name to be defiled, for He is the Lord who would only tell the truth (v.6).

In chapter 1, God called the heavens and earth to be His witness. He lamented that even an ox recognized its owner, a donkey recognized where its owner put its food, but Israel didn't recognize Him (Isaiah 1:2-3). For the sake of His reputation, God chose to hold back His anger. He had chosen Israel, and would continue with His work for the sake of His name, and surely, He would not share His glory with anyone else!

Looking back at the time of Exodus, God had proclaimed that he would gain glory through the stubborn King of Egypt and his army, so that the Egyptians would know that He is Lord. And this time God would gain glory through the Babylonians and Chaldeans. He would certainly not share His glory with anyone else. God proclaimed that He is Lord, and entirely different from the idols!

God tolerated the stubborn King of Egypt and his army. We are his Chosen Ones. Although there are times when we are stubborn, God continues to wait patiently for us to change. God is indeed a God who exceeds our expectations.

Prayer:

Dear God, there is none like you, who would hold back your anger and work out your plan in your people. God, please help me to stop taking advantage of your tolerance by making you wait. Please forgive my inflexibility and stubbornness and help me to reflect quickly, so that I can savor the sweetness of being united with you.

Isaiah

48:12-22

Mar 25 (Day 25)

When the Lord proclaimed that “I am the one who is present at the very beginning, and at the very end” (v.12), He was actually demanding that the people understood and acknowledged that God was the One who created the world. When He said His hands founded the earth, and His right hand spread out the sky, on one hand He was showing off His power, and on the other hand, He was clearly stating that He was the One who was present at creation. Hence, the Lord was the one from the beginning till the end, and whatever that had happened to Israel or had been accomplished, He hid nothing from Israel (Isaiah 48:6,16). In short, He expressed His presence, and took responsibility for everything from the beginning till the end.

Back then, Abram who was the wandering Aramean, listened to God, and God promised that his offspring would be as countless as the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky. They

later became a nation, and after some time, Judah was defeated by Babylon, and its people were exiled to a foreign land. The Lord said from the beginning till now, He was behind all these, and this meant that He was their Creator.

In 48:17, the Lord proclaimed Himself as protector of Israel, the Holy One of Israel, and the One who taught them the way of life, just like a father or a mother to them. As a matter of fact, God would deal with Babylon and the Chaldeans! Though Israel was now in Babylon, God said when they eventually left Babylon, they would shout for joy! Eventually the Lord would protect and redeem His servant Jacob, and He proclaimed that “there will not be prosperity for the wicked.” (V.22), they would be dealt with by the Lord.

The Lord shall lead them through dry regions, and they would not thirst. God seemed to be sending a reminder that He had once led the Israelites out from Egypt. If they were hesitating, the past record would enhance their faith, and encourage them to leave Babylon when it was time to!

Recognizing that God was the Creator would ensure that they looked up in anticipation at what God wanted to achieve (Isaiah 48:6) and trust that He would bring the Jews residing in Babylon back to the land of their ancestors, and turn them back to the Lord. This was the restoration which the Lord intended to bring about.

Prayer:

Dear God, you are our Creator and we put our lives in your hands! We believe that you would want to lead us to revival, we also want to obey your lead with confidence, and live our lives as worshippers.

Isaiah

49:1-6

Mar 26 (Day 26)

God spoke to the Israelites while they were sojourners in Babylon, and He called forth this “servant” to the center of the story.

The speaker of this passage could be found speaking to people living on the coastlands and to those who lived far away (they could be Gentiles, or Jews in diaspora). Who was he? We will soon find out more about his identity. He claimed that the Lord summoned him from birth and commissioned him (v.1). In the past, the Lord spoke and His words brought forth the heavens and the earth, but over here, the Lord was going to use this servant’s mouth, words and voice to speak on His behalf. The servant said his mouth was like a “sharp sword” and “sharpened arrow”, in the hands of the Lord for His use. In other words, God’s word would now be delivered by this chosen person. We are reminded of the times when he was hidden by God in the hollow of His

hand, or in His quiver (v.2) like a secret weapon.

If the servant was called to be a “sharp sword” or “sharpened arrow”, he would be an effective tool of the Lord at all times. However, his experience made him conclude that his effort was in vain. The servant said to God “I have expended my energy for absolutely nothing” (v.4). Yet he said the Lord who had called him would “vindicate” him and “reward” him.

Verse 5 spelt out that the commission of this servant was to restore Jacob to the Lord, and he regarded his task as honorable, and trusted that the Lord would be his source of strength. God had planned to restore the tribes of Jacob, and to bring the remnants back to their homeland. God had even said, “Is it too insignificant a task for you?” In fact, what God had in mind for this servant was for him to become a light to the nations, and to bring deliverance to the remote regions of the earth!

Through the book of Isaiah, we discover that, God’s salvation was not just to re-establish Israel and the tribes of Jacob, but also to include different nations and ethnic groups of people in his big plan of restoration.

If this servant was the secret weapon, how did he become the light to nations despite previously being despised? However, this made it more obvious that the servant was the secret weapon, because of his surprising transformation.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, please help your servant. Whether to be used by you, or to be hidden by you, I am willing to surrender to you. I want to be fully focused on you. So that when I am used, I would not be reliant on human recognition and appreciation, and lose the connection I have with you. When you hide me, I will not suspect that I am useless, but see that 'my worth is not based on praises received, but based on your eternal love for me'.

Isaiah

49:7-13

Mar 27 (Day 27)

If before his debut the servant heard that he was “the one who is despised and rejected by nations”, he would surely be anticipating an agonizing experience. Yet the Lord said there would be a surprise twist, and one day he would no longer be lowly and despised; at the end, Kings would see him and rise in respect to welcome him. The crucial point is God is faithful, and it is He who would lift up His lowly servant to become a respectable ambassador to the Kings, one who would be duly received and respected. This is reflected in Isaiah 49:5, where vindication came from God, and as such His servant was duly honored.

When the servant said that he was toiling in vain, God would say to him “At the time I decide to show my favor, I will respond to you; in the day of deliverance I will help you” (v.8). When the Lord said “I will protect you and make you a covenant mediator

for people,”(v.8) he was saying that He would bless the people through His servant. “Plans to rebuild the land and to reassign the desolate property,” would be a great encouragement to the sojourners in Babylon. As they were born and raised in Babylon, and were unfamiliar with the land where their grandparents had come from, God would help by reassigning land in their homeland back to them as property, and it would be the servant who was commissioned to carry out this task.

If there were to be reassignment of land, of course the people had to make their way back to inherit the land! On one hand, there was this announcement to the sojourners in Babylon: You are free to depart from Babylon, so pack up and go back to your ancestors’ land! On the other hand, the good news was also proclaimed to those who were sitting in the dark, imprisoned in sin, telling them that it was time to come out, and no longer be fearful of being seen!

The restoration of God would take place, this was beyond doubt. Even though the challenge of making the journey with women, elderly and children coupled with many other inconveniences would make people think twice about whether or not to make the trip, but God said all the mountains were His, and He would make a way for them; He would provide for them and guide them, so that they would not be thirsty and hungry.

Because of all that God had done, therefore, people from all nations, and all who are created by God shall come and witness the Lord’s

restoration, and shout for joy! For the Lord consoles His people and shows compassion to the oppressed! (v.12-13)

Prayer:

Dear God, your vindication is totally amazing! And it is also amazing to see you open a way in the mountains. You are the God whom we can trust. When we follow your purpose, we would admittedly face different challenges and difficulties but you will provide for our needs. And you will help us see what we need to change.

Isaiah

49:14-23

Mar 28 (Day 28)

The text begins with a monologue of the city of Zion (v.14); the rest of the section comprises the LORD's response to the people. There are several biblical passages in the Old Testament where God spoke to the people as a mother. Verse 15 portrays a moving picture concerning the tender mercies of the Covenantal God. A mother can never forget the child whom she has nursed. From the time of their birth, babies will need to feed on their mother's milk. During the stage of breast-feeding, an intimate bond will naturally develop between the mother and the infant. Can a mother ever become so heartless, that she can abandon and forget a child whom she is nursing? The LORD employed the imagery of an affectionate mother towards her nursing child to illustrate the tender aspect of His covenantal-love towards His people Israel. Even if there are exceptions, where a mother, for some

reason, forgets her child, the LORD solemnly declared that He would never ever forget His own. Such was the depth of His love towards Israel.

"Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me." (v.16) Perhaps the LORD had engraved an image of the city's ruined wall on His palm. Whenever he looked at His palm, it was a reminder of the people. In this manner, He would never forget Jerusalem. "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry." "The LORD is near to those with broken hearts; He saves those whose spirit is crushed." "You who answer prayer, to you all people will come." (Psalm 34:15, Psalms 65:2) Verses 18-23 describe the day when the exiles would return to their homeland. The city shall overflow with joy, and its people be adorned as a bride in her fullest radiance. Life shall replace death; jubilation, in place of mourning, and the desolated towns would become vibrant again.

Verse 23 says, "Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers" Those words astonished the Israelites because the neighboring kingdoms had been nothing but trouble for them. They were the fiends who had invaded their homeland. However, due to God's sovereign intervention, those kingdoms would undertake the task of bringing up the children of Israel. Only the LORD is capable of declaring such wonders and making them happen eventually.

Prayer:

O, LORD God, what you do in human history is clothed with wonders. You cause those who are filled with despair to lift up their heads with hope once again.

Isaiah

49:24-26

Mar 30 (Day 29)

Today's text begins with a question, and the warrior in the question presumably was Babylon. "Can spoils be taken from a warrior, captives be rescued from a conqueror?" (v.24) Babylon was such a powerful warrior, who could be his competitor? God knew that He could do it. In order to accomplish His will, Babylon had to be dealt with. And the sequence of events that led to the eventual demise of Babylon the powerful warrior could be traced all the way to a tiny nation called Judah. Was this a realistic hope? Would Persia become a superpower that could potentially save Judah? When God wanted to save Judah from Babylon, it was like someone who intended to snatch a prey from the mouth of a lion, was it possible? But God said, "captives will be taken from a warrior; spoils will be rescued from a conqueror. I will oppose your adversary and I will rescue your

children." (v.25) Babylon was once the agent of the Lord and reigned over Judah, whether from a political or theological perspective, it happened because the Lord had placed Judah under the power of Babylon. This time round, who would be the more powerful warrior to release Judah from warrior Babylon?

The answer is God could do it! "I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will get drunk on their own blood, as if it were wine. Then all humankind will recognize that I am the Lord, your deliverer, your protector, the powerful Ruler of Jacob." (v.26) Despite the power and size of the Babylon Empire, because the Lord had established His covenant with Israel, the Lord would be their redeemer. Read Leviticus 25:47-48 to have a better idea of redeemer. Judah, while in the hands of Babylon, had no one to come forth as its redeemer, and it was at this point in time that the Lord came forth and declared that he would be the redeemer. Even though they had no brothers or cousins to redeem them, but God was their Creator, and so He would also be their Redeemer.

Prayer:

Our Lord, you released those who were imprisoned, you said you were the redeemer, the powerful ruler of Jacob; this amazes us and makes us so astonished! Please come and rescue me from the grasp and power of sin, give me the strength to ward off the temptation of evil so that I would not be trapped in sin, but set free from it.

Isaiah

50:1-11

Mar 31 (Day 30)

Verses 1-3 in this chapter can be regarded as the final reply from God to the question posed in 49:14. It sounded like a father talking to his children, sort of like when a couple is not communicating with each other, the father speaks to the children expecting them to pass on the message to the absent mother. If Zion thought that she was being abandoned, the Lord asked, where on earth was the divorce certificate? When did the covenant God ever desert them? The verse in 50:2 brought them back to the historical site where they crossed the Red Sea. The sea was divided before their eyes as though there was a retaining wall, and fish died due to the lack of water. Did they forget what the Lord had done for them? When he came back to look for them, why couldn't he find someone waiting for Him?

As we know, the Lord had made up His mind to be their Redeemer,

and His decision was considered irreversible. Despite the fact that none responded when He called, the Lord would make His way in. How would the Lord make an inroad to them?

50:4 states one of the required factors for restoration that was mentioned on Day 25. They needed to listen attentively like a prophet, with their "antenna" turned on from day to night for the Lord, this would lead to renewal! This is depicted in a lively way where "He wakes me up every morning; he makes me alert so I can listen attentively as disciples do." Yes, this was exactly what the Lord expected from the people of God. Israel as the servant of the Lord should be able to endure hardship and not be defeated. They should be able to withstand dispute and challenges. Israel was to be called as a witness of God, witnessing to the deeds and words of the Lord.

And after the Lord's words were declared, there was no more opportunity to be on the fence. You either chose to fear the Lord, and pay full attention to the voice of the prophet, or you chose to put fire under the feet of the prophet and burn him at the stake. For those who listened and responded to the prophet-servant, their fate would be similar to that of the prophet-servant (v 4-9). Should they be walking deep into the dark, all the more they needed to endure and trust the Lord all the way (v.10). As for those who chose otherwise, they would "lie down in a place of pain" (v.11).

Prayer:

Dear Lord, just as Israel needed renewal, so do we. We need to listen to you by opening our ears and paying full attention to your words. After listening, we need to follow, believe and obey your words.

Isaiah

51:1-8

Apr 1 (Day 31)

It is hard to imagine that Jerusalem could be restored after being destroyed for decades (v.3). Isaiah painted a rosy picture of the restoration which should have been impossible given the situation then. However, God's people pursued holiness and sought the Lord (v.1). If they knew what was right and were aware of God's law (v.7), nothing would have been impossible.

Isaiah reminded the Israelites that their existence from the line of Abraham and Sarah was a miracle in itself, given that both Abraham and Sarah were well beyond the conceiving age. To use Abraham and Sarah to multiply and create a nation was equivalent to digging people from the quarry and chiseling them from rock (v.1). Jerusalem's situation at the time of the book was equivalent to a childless old woman, who was seen as hopeless, shameful and helpless. Hence, when one thought about

the days when God helped Sarah, he would find hope in Jerusalem's restoration.

God's people were not just required to look back at history but also to look forward. Time was in God's control. Their world would eventually dissipate, wear out and die (v.6), but this God whom they relied on was eternal. Hence, they could believe confidently in God's vision of creation. Furthermore, God had something new in store. The problems they were facing should be cast aside like worn out clothes, and they should wait for God's promised salvation (v.6). The new Jerusalem would last forever and would exceed all current expectations. It would not just be the Israelites who would receive glory, but also the "nations" and the "coastlands" (v.5), which implied that this new kingdom was for all. People who are discouraged should keep this in their sight.

Prayer:

Father, I want to listen attentively to you. Every morning I want to be waiting for you, I want your teachings instilled in my heart. Please enable me to trust in you, and do your will. Because whatever difficulties I have in front of me will eventually pass, only your salvation is eternal and your righteousness will last forever.

Isaiah

51:9-16

Apr 2 (Day 32)

Isaiah started the first paragraph with a call to wake the warring God (v.9). Why did Isaiah make the call? To understand why, recognise that, whether in the past or present, small nations tend to look at superpowers as insurmountable forces. Smaller kingdoms are sometimes caught up in the struggles between larger countries. Who can vindicate them? Who can overcome the strong and administer justice? It is only the God of creation who can provide support, comfort and justice to the people in tumultuous times. In mythology, disasters tended to be the result of mischief of sea monsters. But in creation, God overcame these monsters (See Psalms 89:9-13), brought about order from chaos, and brought about abundance in land and sea from emptiness. Similarly, when the Israelites were fleeing the Egyptian army, God parted the Red Sea and brought the Israelites

to safety. The “arm” (verse 13) as expressed by Isaiah invoked these images and signified the ability of God to overcome enemies and solve problems. Therefore, the prophet’s call was a call to God to manifest His power over evil forces. In times of turmoil and chaos, God provided rescue. In the eyes of the people, especially the Israelites who had been oppressed for a long period of time, Egypt was regarded as a bully that was not to be trifled with. However, in the eyes of God, Egypt was like one of those sea monsters that had previously been defeated by God (See Isaiah 30:7).

To the people who were living in difficult and uncertain times, this passage brought about the image of God revealing Himself and personally consoling the people. In the eyes of the Creator, tyrant men and dictators were no cause for concern. After all, they were just “mere human beings who are as short-lived as grass” (verse 12). Hence, it was never a question of God’s ability but rather a matter of His willingness to help the people. To this, God answered: you are my people, which means to say that God was definitely involved in this. It was then promised that “The one who suffers will soon be released; he will not die in prison; he will not go hungry.” (v.14) This was a great source of motivation and respite for the people.

Prayer:

God, we are small, and we have much sorrow and distress in this world, but you are the creator God and you marvel us. You regard us as your people, and we are truly blessed.

Isaiah

51:17-52:6

Apr 3 (Day 33)

In the preceding passage, it was a wakeup call for God who was fighting for his people. Today, we read that the prophet made two more wakeup calls, but this time to Jerusalem. First, she must sober up from collapsing after drinking spiked wine. The ferocity of the spiked wine came from God's wrath, and the outcome was waves of calamity. Jerusalem was brought to her knees after the drink. Now, she laid slumped in an alley, like a discarded or neglected corpse. Her children were too pre-occupied with their own troubles to search for her (51:20). However, it was time to wake up, because God had decided to remove the cup and she would no longer drink from it (51:22). God would instead put it into the hands of her tormentors (51:23). That referred to the oppressing Babylonians. God would repay them with their destruction. Babylon's fate would be

like the present slumped and incurable Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem shall wake up (52:1). In the second paragraph, the prophet then aroused her pride of freedom. The metaphor described how God redeemed Jerusalem like a redeemed slave.

God's attitude redeemed Jerusalem, but God said He paid nothing (52:3), because Assyria and Babylon offered nothing to Jerusalem. When the Israelites took refuge in Egypt, it was not exactly hospitable, but neither was it hostile at first. However, Assyria and Babylon were brutal to the Israelites, and arrogant towards God (52:5). Since they were insufferable, God would not care about them. Thus, in redeeming Jerusalem, Babylon's fate was unlike Egypt's (see Is. 43:3). Cyrus of Persia would rob them of everything and Babylon would be annihilated. Now, God wanted to acknowledge his daughter, and after sobering up, Jerusalem wanted to get to know God. Through the tribulations, it saw that neither its embarrassment in the past nor its future freedom were by chance. This was the awakening of Jerusalem.

Prayer:

God, you are the one who awakens and stirs us up! Now that I am awake, I have to stay awake. Please help me to constantly be alert when I pray, so that I will not fall into temptation. For although my heart is willing, my flesh is weak. I want to trust in you when I pray, that I may gain power through praise. I will clothe myself with praises to you, and always call your name!

Isaiah

52:7-12

Apr 4 (Day 34)

God's people might be longing for a Davidic king, but their true wish would be for God Himself to reign. So, if anyone were to announce this good news to them, and even if this messenger's feet might be caked in mud, the receivers would see him as lovely. Because the message was "God is king". Such occasions always implied the deliverance and restoration of God's people. But isn't God always reigning? How can any matter escape His control? How would such an announcement be "good news"? But from Israel's perspective, God's reign should imply His orders were completed and His wishes fulfilled. So, when the world was in disorder, when evil ran rampant, it seemed like God was not reigning. At other times, God reigned but was in the mode of punishing them, so that would not be "good news". Therefore, if God would extend a hand to save them, and then reign with kindness,

that would be good news indeed.

Reigning should not simply mean holding the ceremonial title of kingship. Only when His directives and policies were followed, then it would truly be reigning. Thus, the people shouted for joy, indicating that they had witnessed something good worth celebrating. When the prophet proclaimed God's reign, it meant that the situation would transform according to God's will. The prophet gave the final call, this time to the Jews exiled in Babylon. Do not be seduced by the prosperity there and settle down, instead be ready to depart (v.11), to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their homes. God reigns! God will save and intervene in history! The arms of the Lord (v.10) and Jerusalem have both awakened. To see the new Jerusalem, they shall depart from Babylon who awaited judgment. We can never predict when God chooses to act, but when he reigns, there is always a herald. Our appropriate action is to respond accordingly.

Prayer:

The Lord reigns, what good news!
Hallelujah! God, I want to
surrender completely, obey fully, and
proclaim that you are my king. I
entrust you with my plans, ideals and
the road ahead. Please take charge
of my life.

Isaiah

52:13-53:3

Apr 6 (Day 35)

Servant of God (I)

Who was the Servant of God? Was it Israel? Was it one of the prophets? Both were possibilities. However, it is not as important to confirm who the servant was, what is more important is how the listeners reacted when faced with what befell the servant. When witnessing the situation faced by the servant, they were touched, making them turn to God and reconcile with God. Not only did the Servant accomplish this, the effects startled many nations. He was like a priest of the nations, spattering them with blood and cleansing them. They used to ignore God. But upon seeing how God's Servant was exalted, they were silenced (see Psalm 2). This was a heart-rendering story that was beyond imagination. This was an incredible and touching legend. Slowly, many were convinced by this testimony. This servant caused such a reaction through God's way and wisdom and fulfilled the mission

entrusted to him by God. It was also because these stories had such an effect, that the understanding that the servant of God could point towards Jesus, as well as the Church, continued on to the New Testament times (see 1 Peter 2:21-22).

The story started in an unassuming manner, but that was precisely the key to this character. God did not call for an outlandish figure to put on an impressive performance. Instead, He elected an ordinary looking person as His starting point. This seemed in line with God's usual style. Israel was weak among the nations. Nobody had a clue about the appearances of the Prophets, whether Isaiah or Jeremiah. But because of how ordinary this man was, when he was glorified at the end, it accentuated the extraordinary work of God. From his initial simplicity, we can confirm that it was not due to his own special qualities, but rather God's sanctified use of this man, that he accomplished such a mission that was beyond him. Not only was he ordinary, he was downtrodden. Whether it was the attack of illnesses or troubles, we might assume that he brought this upon himself. But to our surprise, this was the precursor to the great twist in the story.

Prayer:

The Servant of God met with troubles and pain. But Lord, when your will is accomplished, we are awed by your ways. Allow us who have been inspired by the life of the servant to also be used by God as holy in our daily lives, and be contented to be a part of God's story.

Isaiah 53:4-12

Apr 7 (Day 36)

Servant of God (II)

When the Servant of God met with many troubles, onlookers thought he deserved them. But when the truth was revealed, they discovered he was innocent. He willingly suffered for them. Note: It is "for them", not "instead of them." We know that the audience of the prophet was also suffering. But the Servant suffered alongside them even though he was innocent. The punishment they deserved for their sins was laid upon him as well. In executing his prophetic ministry, he had to endure further pain from misunderstandings and false accusations. It was for the purpose of completing God's will, but he was beaten for it. Throughout the process of being mocked and despised, the Servant accepted it all willingly. He did not cry out in grief nor cry foul, nor resist, or retaliate. He bore all of it till his death.

Hence, when this man was proven innocent, the realization of

the crowds was alarming. What had happened? Who was this man? Their hardened hearts were shaken by the authentic life testimony of the Servant. They were shocked that an innocent man would willingly bear the well-deserved sufferings of a guilty crowd; the persevering and sacrificing will of God to win them back was fully expressed. The lost returned because of this love. Thus, they realized: because he endured the punishment, they received peace; because of his wounds they had been healed. God was not taking revenge upon them, but rather disciplining them to get them to repent. And when they witnessed this Servant who silently suffered from their misdeeds, they came to their senses and understood God's will. They were the unrepentant and rebellious ones. This Servant demonstrated true obedience to God. Not only that, the Servant's pain was the Master's pain. The Servant's sacrifice for his fellow men was God's sacrifice for his people. When the people finally returned to God, the Servant's glory was God's glory.

Prayer:

God, your Servant had suffered, yet we failed to see. Only upon his vindication did we come to a full realization. Allow us today to be quick in seeing your purpose, in understanding your heart, in suffering what you suffered, in loving what you love, to be compassionate to your servant and to be loyal to you.

Isaiah

54:1-10

Apr 8 (Day 37)

Isaiah 54 depicts Jerusalem as a barren woman who was desolate. The descriptions of the barren woman from verse 1 to 'don't be afraid, do not be ashamed' in verse 4, put us in the shoes of the infertile woman so that we would appreciate how hard it must have been for them to live in society at that time. And when we think about an 'abandoned woman', it sounds lonely and sad, but this woman would be remembered fondly. Then, no one would remember 'the shame of her widowhood'(v.4), and she gets to enlarge her tent and stretch her tent curtains wide (v2).

Why was there suddenly such great joy? Why was the barren woman full of cheer? Why would those who had been abandoned see their descendants dispossess nations and settle in them? Why would a deserted town flourish after being captured? How can such a transformation take place after many years of sadness?

It was because it was God who spoke to her, He called her, and told her that He had abandoned her for a while. Yes, there was anger, there was absence, but God did not abandon her now; He said that He wanted to treat her with mercy and love! The husband of Jerusalem was her Creator God. God's word was fulfilled in the end. By the time Jesus entered into the scene, Jerusalem was a populated city, and also the focal point of the people of God who awaited restoration. The period of childlessness was in the past, and now Jerusalem could lift up her head among the nations.

There is no doubt that God had shown His anger in the past, but that was only for a moment, such as in the days of Noah (v. 9). The population of Judah had reduced substantially after judgment fell on them, but consequently, God lived up to His promise and the population grew. Hence, believing in God requires courage and faith, but it is definitely not walking in the dark, for the work of God is traceable. "In the same way I have vowed that I will not be angry at you or shout at you." (v.9) God, who is a faithful God, proclaimed that His covenant would be even more unmovable than the mountains (v.10), so there was nothing to fear about the future, and Israel could disregard the present shame that she was suffering. The past would be past.

Prayer:

God, Your words of comfort are as sweet as long-anticipated rain to us. Allow me to come before you every morning and listen to your words of kindness, and to be embraced by your love and peace every day.

Isaiah

54:11-17

Apr 9 (Day 38)

If God wanted to restore Jerusalem, it would be like an abandoned wife returning back, this passage describes the scene after the 'revival'. Before the revival, the history of the Israelites was one of shame; after the revival it was necessary to express love, commitment and forgiveness. God constructed a fresh appearance to express Jerusalem's brand-new look. Jerusalem would become a city of substance, like a rich woman laden with jewels and accessories. Isaiah imagined the grandeur of the city and its gate and structure. Such a transformation would be like when the prodigal son returns and his father dresses him up. (Luke 15:22) The sentiments of the father went without saying. Through this, His people experienced the magnitude of His grace. They realized that even though they were not loyal in the past, God's love had never left them.

However, what the city needed was not external beauty but the people's moral and spiritual renewal. The beautification of this city was actually a reflection of the renewed people. Although a city's stability depended on the structure and construction of its walls, its geographical location, a defense force and its use of technology, but its enduring strength depended on the quality of its people. How was God going to ensure that Jerusalem's revival would last forever? Verse 13 says 'All your children will be taught by the Lord, and great will be their peace.' This expressed that they were going to be God's students. God's law was made to ensure the peace of the society so that everyone could live in harmony. The apprenticeship meant that there would be constant mentorship, denoting how God would bring the city lasting peace (Shalom). If God's words were meant to educate and instruct the new community who had been pardoned, the foundation of this city would be firmly established on God's righteousness.

The Lord who had weakened Ephraim and Judah in the past would not be doing that again. The Lord would now campaign for them, be their guardian, unlike in the past where he deliberately made them defenseless. This vision was pragmatic as Jerusalem still had lots of conflicts, and enemies who would be a threat to their security. The Lord had turned around and had promised to provide the means of resolving their disputes and the strength to defend the city. "If anyone dares to challenge you, it will not be my doing! Whoever tries to challenge you will be

defeated," declares the Lord (verse 15). Jerusalem's lost-and-found story reminds us that being God's servant implies carrying the burden of His mission, yet it also entails having God's love and protection. God's rebuke is heavy, but only temporary. God's salvation is based on His faithfulness, hence, it is sure to be accomplished.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we worship you, as you are the One who brings forth restoration, compassion, commitment and forgiveness. I wish that my entire family and I will follow you, learn from your teachings and enjoy peace.

Isaiah

55:1-5

Apr 10 (Day 39)

In the most glorious days of David – a great ruler and commander of many victorious battles – smaller surrounding nations had willingly conceded defeat to join his empire. However, as generations passed, the descendants of David’s empire had become exiled refugees in Babylon; a far cry from David’s ability to summon nations to come to him (verse 5) during his time. Maybe a more practical plan would be to wait peacefully and prepare to be away for a long time.

Any thoughts of returning to Jerusalem might be futile, considering that at best, they would lose their chance to settle in and assimilate into a new culture, but at worst, they might incur the wrath of the Babylonian rulers and put what was left of the nation in danger. In terms of resource management, it was only logical that a person allocated his resources in preparation for a better future. Hence,

it certainly seemed more pragmatic to just settle down for the long-term in the foreign land of Babylon.

However, against all odds and amidst their apprehension, God had advised His people against settling down in Babylon. This was because in view of Babylon’s imminent fall, staying put would mean “paying for something that would not nourish” them, and “spending their hard-earned money on something that would not satisfy” (v.2). Babylon’s decline was approaching, and when it happened, their industries and jobs would all be lost with the destruction of Babylon.

On the contrary, pinning their hopes on God would promise an entirely different outcome. God promised a covenant with these people, just like He did with King David.

The key difference this time was that God did it not through the ruler of a nation, but in a direct and unconditional covenantal relationship (verse 3), bestowed upon them by His grace. God called all who were thirsty to “come to the water” and all who had no money to “come buy wine and milk without cost” (verse 1). His sole request was for the people to “pay attention” and “listen” so that they could live (verse 3).

Not only that, just like during David’s time, God’s promise was for all nations to bow before them. This was not because the nations wanted to pander to an important person, it was because God wanted to glorify His people, and even more because they admired Him (v.5).

If the people of Israel were able

to manifest God’s grace in their lives, they would be a great testimony to all nations that had been summoned to come. For God had never given up his vision for the world, and in providing for His people an unconditional covenant, they should also move forward with this same vision in mind.

Prayer:

As unworthy as we may be, we thank you Lord for inviting us to come before you in a covenant, bestowing upon us the honor to seek you and learn your word. I want to listen to the true meaning of living, live out my life in your grace and build a dream with you. Help us to adjust our lives and pace, in preparation for us working together with you.

Isaiah

55:6-13

Apr 11 (Day 40)

Just how trustworthy are the words spoken by God? Are His promises as true as the purity of gold? The Creator-God had answered these questions Himself. "The rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater" (v.10).

As the LORD had designed this world as one that is capable of sustaining life, we can also learn much from it by observing its natural wonders. Since God governs the order in nature by means of His spoken words, the rain or snow shall surely accomplish their divinely ordained purpose. These elements in nature strongly testify to the trustworthiness of the words that the LORD has spoken.

When the LORD keeps silent, the world will still continue to revolve but its motion would then be aimless

and non-meaningful. However, the moment the LORD speaks, whatever that is verbally decreed shall materialize. Such is the awesome power of the LORD's word.

Even when God's people were judged and exiled to Babylon, it was not the time to give up or be in total despair for the people. As the LORD had spoken about a New Covenant and His intention to renew His relationship with the people, they would have to wait and hope for the fulfillment of the divine promise to return them to their land.

Despite the fact that Israel's failure had brought much pain and grief to Him, God still remembered His covenantal relationship with the people and was willing to forgive them. Although the broken covenantal relationship seemed irreparable, its revival was not by the work of human planning but by means of God's plan and acts. The realization of this much-anticipated event was pinned entirely on the will of God, whose power was ever inscrutable.

God promised His people that they "will go out in joy and be led forth in peace" (verse 12). The road that led to their homeland would be well-paved and their hometowns would be ready to receive them. As a nature-loving Poet, God used imageries from His creation to depict the heart-warming scene of the home-coming in verses 12-13. Life in the forest would begin afresh even after a devastating fire. Such wonder in nature bears witness to the veracity of God's words concerning the renewal of the covenantal relationship.

Whatever difficulties we may

encounter in life, even if the problems are sin-related, the word of God is our strength and our hope. We will hope in the LORD to remember us in our weak and frail state, to accompany us all the way in our journey, until we have arrived at the place which He has prepared for us.

Prayer:

O God, your thoughts surpass my understanding and way of thinking. You have given me the opportunity to turn back towards you. Such gracious love is great and profound, which goes beyond my comprehension. We can only exclaim in praise, "Your will is perfect and you will accomplish what you have spoken. May your will be done on earth and also in your Church. May your Church, in turn, bear witness to the nations and lead the people to come to you."

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