

Isaiah 40

Chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah begins what is referred to at least informally as second Isaiah. The prophet's real name is never actually given.

Between the end of chapter 39 and the beginning of chapter 40, 150 years have passed. One hundred and fifty long, miserable years. The psalm we read is one of many that captures the sorrow and lament of the captives in Babylon during that time.

The entire book of Lamentations is their cry of sorrow and grief...their feelings of abandonment and defeat.

Then, a new prophet bursts on the scene with these words: Comfort, o comfort my people. The prophet declares that the long years of suffering are over. Judah's future has been decisively changed for the good by God.

These are words of promise...homecoming...comfort...words that echo to all future generations in their own form of exile. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel said this about the declaration: No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when the sick world cries.

I'm generally pretty cerebral...my spirituality, unless I work to approach it in other ways, is very much a head spirituality rather than heart. There is lots of good heady stuff one could say about the theology and history of Isaiah 40.

But every time I hear it read, all I hear is music. Mostly from Handel's Messiah. Isaiah is the source of a good chunk of the first part of the Messiah. Three songs come from Isaiah 40 alone. But there's also at least one choral piece I've sung based on Isaiah 40. And don't forget Prepare ye from Godspell – that's actually John the Baptist, but of course John is echoing the ancient prophet.

Music is a heart and soul thing more than a head thing. It evokes emotions...joy, sorrow, love, longing, comfort...you name it.

A couple weeks ago I went to Abendmusik's community sing-along of Handel's Messiah at First Plymouth Church. I've sung a few of the pieces in choir years ago but had never participated in this. It was led by the pros in the Abendmusik choir and chamber orchestra.

On the familiar choral pieces the people gathered were invited to sing along, in parts. They didn't really have us sit in sections and it's been a long time since I've sung it anywhere but my

car, so my effort was a bit laughable. But I picked out enough of the alto part, or at least notes that fit in the chords to feel like I was singing in a massive choir.

There is nothing quite like singing in a big choir in four-part harmony to evoke the sights and sounds of the heavenly choir of angels.

That day was like that.

Music, sung or played with harmony, is a beautiful metaphor for how life should be. If the sopranos sing the melody without the other parts, it will be beautiful, and you'll typically hear the melody. But something will be missing.

If the altos sing their part by themselves, you might hear something without much melody and wonder what in the world they're singing.

The voices of the tenors alone will soar. But you still won't be sure how the song goes. And the basses will provide a deep undertone that makes everyone say, whoa, cool. But you still won't really hear the song.

But put it all together and you have the soaring beauty of Glory to God or the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.

Or for that matter songs from the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Mumford and Sons, Pentatonix, classic rock ...even some occasional punk rock.

The different parts come together, not in sameness, but nonetheless in unity. You find yourself longing for all of life to be that way. All the parts come together to create something no one person can do on their own.

While there is much beauty in a single clear, a Capella voice, most of our favorites have vocal and instrumental harmonies, some of which seem to carry us into another dimension.

And when you are a part of the singing or playing, at least for me it's an experience like no other. It's a spiritual experience that's definitely not cerebral.

Music has the power to not only bring different voices together, but to even bring people together.

This fall we participated in a weekly study hosted by the Nebraska Synod's racial justice group. Each week we listened to an episode of the 1619 project podcast and discussed it on Zoom. The 1619 project itself was compiled into a book that I've read.

One of the sections was on music and the contribution of Black people to virtually all music that you would call American. From the slave spirituals and African and Caribbean rhythms to the tunes from minstrel shows to blues to jazz, rock, and rap. The chapter was interesting to read. But on the podcast, it was mostly examples of the music, and it was so much more fun to listen to.

It also made me think about how unifying music can be. So much American music has the different cultural influences of Europe, Africa, and Latin America. But you can also spin up Spotify and listen to music from all over the world from K-Pop to the Mongolian throat singers.

The pinnacle of Isaiah 40 is verse 5: Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

All flesh shall see the glory of the Lord...together. In unity all flesh will stand together in awe at the glory of God. Like the different parts of a choral piece, the diversity of our world's people will stand together in awe.

In this war-torn world, that seems a hard promise to believe. In a world where so many people do live in actual physical exile, it's a hard promise to believe. In a world where many who, although they still live in the home they always have, wonder what on earth happened to the life they used to know, it's a hard promise to believe.

And yet the promise remains that although people, like grass and flowers, may wither and fade, the word of our God will stand forever.

So, in this tumultuous December, when we long for God to bring peace and well-being, when we long for a unity we seem to be unable to muster on our own, we hear the words of the prophet...those words of comfort and hope. And we place our hope in the coming of the Christ child to begin the fulfillment of that promise.

But let's not just end with words... play Glory to God from Handel's Messiah