

Good Press

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

News reports tell of migrant caravans moving across Honduras, Guatemala and southern Mexico. Though smaller (so far) than those seen some years ago, masses of infants and children and youth and women and men have started walking toward us. They hope to cross the desert before the heat of summer. They do not know what will happen when they reach our southern border. The Biden administration has not yet sent clear signals about its immigration policies. On the one hand, construction of more border wall has halted. On the other, tent camps for detainees are under construction. Meanwhile, those people are coming.

Why would people travel some 1,200 miles—perhaps having to walk the whole way—to a place that may not welcome them? They are desperate. Honduras is barely a nation in any recognizable sense. Millions there are starving. Its people fear the roving gangs that steal children and rape women. So many men have left, some for the U.S., others for Mexico, still others to join those gangs, that living as a family has for the impoverished majority become far less common. Which of us can truly understand life as a poor Honduran in the 21st century?

Which of us, for that matter, can understand life as a Jew in exile in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ? Our passage from Isaiah 40 comes from one of them.

Writing in the name of Isaiah but living decades after the actual prophet's death, this anonymous author was a slave in a foreign land. We know virtually nothing about him. We may feel as though our jobs and our families restrict our freedom. But we have no idea what the frustration, the anger and the resignation to the inexorable weight of slavery do to human beings. Like slaves in the American South until the mid 19th century, the Jews in Babylon faced inhumane conditions, sadistic punishment for the slightest infractions and possibly worst of all, the degradation of their spirits.

Yet this anonymous slave could write of God, "It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing." Gosh, wonder which princes and rulers he has in mind? From the depths of human misery this prophet hears the word of the Lord proclaiming his own power and glory. "Who is my equal?" asks "the Holy One". From the bonds of slavery this prophet hears the Lord promising power to the faithful, strength to the powerless. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength." They will fly like eagles, run without fatigue, walk and not faint. This desperate, enslaved man heard God telling him these things ***and believed them.***

The Lord promises strength and power to enslaved Jews, to impoverished Hondurans, even to privileged Haitians. Because while it will not do for us to try to play the victim—not when most of us have riches and freedoms beyond the imagination of most human beings who have ever walked God's earth—we do in fact

experience loss. Among us we have those enslaved by addiction and/or by mental and emotional illness. We have those almost paralyzed by grief. Some among us have grown sick of living. To all of us the Lord promises strength and power. When we believe this prophecy we find we can turn to that same, One God and receive what we need to keep walking.

If this joining of our experiences with those of the Jews and Central Americans seems a bit of a stretch, consider this fact. According to a study conducted by the IU School of Public Health, in January-March of 2020, *before* the pandemic locked us down, 19.3% of Hoosier high school sophomores had considered committing suicide. Nearly one in five. That is, in the average Algebra II classroom of thirty students, five or six of them has possibly considered suicide. Furthermore, the study says, 13% of them have made a plan to do it. That would make four in our classroom suicide planners. What is happening? Suicide among youth is widely understood to be motivated by an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness combined with anger. It may surprise many to learn that youth suicide is associated with depression less than it is with anomie. Anomie is a philosophical concept that dates back to the Greek stoics. It means a lack of order, a loss of purpose. Young people often just do not see the point of living and it makes them mad enough to consider taking their own lives.

To which we can imagine the anonymous prophet who wrote our passage from Isaiah saying, "God is your purpose! God is your hope! God is your strength to go on living!" And so say I. Soren Kierkegaard called anomie "the Sickness Unto Death".

He struggled with it all his life. Yet he is known as the “Christian Existentialist” because he kept his faith in Jesus Christ. In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard used our passage from the Gospel of Mark to demonstrate how the miracles and the teachings of Jesus can heal even anomie. Fevers in New Testament times scared people more than we might appreciate. They did not know what caused them, but they did know they frequently killed. The Apostle Simon has a mother-in-law with a fever. Jesus reaches his hand out and helps her rise. “Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.”

Kierkegaard lived in Denmark in the first half of the 19th century. He had a reasonably modern, scientific understanding of fevers and a thoroughly modern skepticism of miracles. Yet he could write of how the Gospel accounts gave him hope. He grounded this hope in the compassion of God. Though we may deny God, God does not deny us. For Kierkegaard the most important thing to take from this Markan passage is that God **wants** to heal us. What's more, in the person of Jesus Christ, God wants our love. Though he heals he sternly reprimands the spirits who recognize him to stay silent. He does not want people to follow him because they are intimidated by his infinite power. He does not want slaves. He wants us freely to choose to walk with him. He loves us and wants to be loved in return.

Nevertheless, word about Jesus' power got around. When that Sabbath expired at sundown, people “brought to him all who were sick or possessed with spirits” and he healed them, too. So how does he follow up on this amazing moment? Does he

hop onto the social media of his day to make sure his brand goes viral? No, he disappears. His disciples find him praying in a lonely spot. Jesus did not and does not care about good press. He does not care about his image. He cares instead that we might walk with him because we want to. Because he gives our lives meaning in a cold world. Because he restores the order of things we so desperately need.

As Christians we are called to have political opinions about immigration. We are called to think about the related issues ***from a biblical and spiritual perspective***, and to advocate for what we believe Jesus wants. We are called to vote for people we believe will do the right thing. This helps give our lives purpose and order.

As Christians we are called to care enough about teens to ask ourselves, what can we do about the terrible lack of hope so many of them seem to have? We are called to love the ones we know personally and to care about the ones we don't. This helps give our lives purpose and order.

As Christians we are called to imitate Jesus, who did not care about good press. Instead, he incarnated the love of God, made it real in time and space. How might we do the same? Going viral does not make us happy in the long term. Looking good does not make us feel loved. Only living in relationship can fulfill us. Relationship with one another, and relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Seek relationship, and you will find order and purpose.