

The End and the Beginning

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts
August 23, 1964

Scripture: Isaiah 40

Introduction

The chapter of the Bible that we have read this morning, was addressed to a group of exiles. This is true of chapters 40-66 of Isaiah, the so-called II Isaiah.

- A. Practice of moving whole populations in ancient times
 - the Kingdom of Israel was taken into exile by the Assyrians – 721 B.C.
 - the Kingdom of Judah by the Chaldeans into Babylon – 586 B.C.
 - It is with the Babylonian exile as background that we can understand Ps.137:
*“By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung our lyres.
For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*
 - Pompey transplants Jews from Palestine to Rome – 63 B.C.
 - Spain exiles Jews – 1492 A.D.
- B. The exiles of today – refugees
 - millions of Germans had to flee from East Germany and Prussia
 - also, Estonians, Latvians & Lithuanians
 - Cubans
- C. Man himself is an exile in the world
 - trapped by destiny and death, by water
 - fear of the stars
 - Gnosticism

Chapter 40 of Isaiah is a message to the exiles of all times.

The wavelike pattern of this chapter: there is a falling and rising of the theme – darkness and light follow each other – the beginning comes after the end; the end first – then the beginning.

I. The wave falls – Sin and punishment

There is the depth of human sin – Israel goes into exile because of her sin. There is the judgment of all the prophets.

We do not like the word sin any more. But it is modern writers who have made us conscious of sin once again: cf. Albert Camus in his Fall. This is a middle class man, not an outcast. We may not like the words “sin” and “punishment” any more, but the fact of the matter is that we are caught in the consequences of our own failures.

But the wave rises = and there is forgiveness.

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

Forgiveness is not something to be expected. It is always a gift. It comes from God. When we speak about and proclaim forgiveness, the divine order is present within the historical.

The end is sin and judgment; the beginning of the divine order is forgiveness.

II. The wave goes down again – we see transitoriness and finitude.

*“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field
The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it.
Surely the people is grass.”*

The realm of human history is the realm of growing and dying. All things human and created pass away. Why bother with the human situation?

The wave rises again: *“The word of our God will stand forever.”*

There is an eternal reality to which we can cling. There is hope.

*“Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd.”*

Again eternity touches time. The end of the human situation is finitude and transitoriness, but the word of God is eternal:

*“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall
never die.”*

Trust in his word and promises.

III. The wave falls again. The nations are nothing:

*“Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales;
behold, he takes up the isles like fine dust...
All the nations are as nothing before him,
They are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”*

There are great nations and powerful nations. There are democratic nations and constitutional democracies. There are many nations greatly blessed. Then all of them become proud and self-assertive. They have been destroyed.

Philip II and the Empire over which the sun did not set. It was not the enemies of Spain that defeated Spain, but the arrogance and stupidity of its governments and leaders. So it can happen to our nation.

But the wave rises again. God stands above the circle of the earth.

*“Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
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 dwell in;
who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.”*

He is the Lord of history, the creator and sustainer. The human situation is the end of all nations. The new beginning is the Lord of history. Before him there is no despair.

IV. Again the wave falls. The servant of the Lord complains that he has not received justice from the Lord.

“My way is hid from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.”

Notice – my way) It is all I. We think we have a claim on God, but we do not.
my right)

Again the wave rises – the Lord gives strength to the weak and to the weary.

*“Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint nor grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;
But they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

The end of the human situation is a complaint to God. The new beginning in God is strength for the weak – the Jewish nation;

-- the crucified – out of the cross, power.

Conclusion

The end of the human situation:

- (1) sin & judgment
- (2) the order of growing & dying
- (3) the order of human greatness & self-destruction

The divine order:

- (1) eternal
- (2) forgiving
- (3) chastising
- (4) receiving the weak

1. Let us not confuse the two orders.
2. Yet only man is beyond the limit of history.
3. Within history the divine order is present in the Christ.

"Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift."

"Comfort, comfort my people."

[Outline taken from Paul Tillich]

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