

# Amazing Grace

## Lent Worship Series

### Week 1: Isaiah of Babylon

#### Sermon

- The **Sermon**, “Grace for the Despairing,” is delivered by the pastor (P) as narrator and another reader (R) as Isaiah, who perhaps is wearing a prayer shawl:

P Have you ever despaired? Has there ever been a time when meaningless and hopelessness seems to pervade your spirit, and where you cannot find light beyond the darkness? If so, you are not alone. Many, indeed most, of the faithful have gone through such times, along with the vast multitudes of humanity.

But we are also not alone in such times because God is with us. And God’s promising word to us in such times speaks a message of hope.

R *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.*

P A time would come for the people of Israel when the glory days of their kingdom would be a distant memory. There would be no more boasting of the great city of Jerusalem or its great temple, for these would be leveled in ruins. And the only ones to rule over them were kings of foreign lands. This would be the time of exile.

To make matters worse, they knew that their exile was the just desserts for sins they had committed. The prophets of Israel warned that a day of judgment was coming when they would be held accountable for their injustices against the poor and the marginalized, for their false worship of other gods, and for their vain boasting in their own superiority. Even though these prophets were ignored and ridiculed, this day of judgment came, and the exile marked

their own guilt. Now the scars of their exile weighed heavily upon their spirits. Their days were filled with emptiness. Their faith in God grew cold and faint. And their hearts were filled with despair.

But then, God would bring a new message to them through the prophet Isaiah. Unlike other prophetic messages of the past, there were no warning and judgment. Instead, God proclaimed an enlivening message of amazing grace and abundant good news!

R *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”*

P Who among us does not welcome a message of comfort when we find our own spirits weighed down heavily by anxiety and despair? Who among us, especially when we know the depth of our own sins and the guilt of our conscience, would not value the precious grace of God sharing words of comfort and consolation—where God seeks us out, not to judge us, but to “speak tenderly” to us, to nurture us back to wholeness and life, to set us upon a new path of righteousness and hope?

God does not leave his people in despair, and judgment and death is never the last word. The last Word is always God’s word of enduring grace. And we may count on the everlasting promise of that saving Word.

R *“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”*

P God’s promising word speaks hope. God’s Word declares an end to the chains of exile, and declares instead that all prisoners of despair and judgment are now set free. Moreover, God’s Word declares that their journey to freedom will be seen before the eyes of all of humanity, as a testimony for all of God’s enduring and glorious grace.

R *“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”*

P Isaiah describes how the wilderness itself will become transformed before their very eyes. Instead of a land of dryness and loneliness, God will make of it a place of welcoming beauty and streaming rivers.

R *“I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert..., to give drink to my chosen people. ... For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make*

*her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”*

P And when this joyous journey across the wilderness reaches its destination, and home is in sight, then the people will raise their voices in praise to the God who fulfills their gracious journey.

R *“‘Here is your God!’ See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”*

P We know of another prophetic voice who cried out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” John the Baptist pointed to Jesus the Christ as our liberator. “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Jesus the Christ is the living Word of God! He will bring forth righteousness and hope for all who are despairing.

R *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”*

P Jesus, the living Word of God, will comfort all who are desperate and defeated, and shine his light upon the darkness.

R *“A light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”*

P Jesus, the living Word of God, casts out all our fear, and forgives us all our sins.

R *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.... I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.”*

P Jesus, the living Word of God, sits at table with disgraced sinners, welcoming and befriending them, even as he freely hosts us with his forgiveness at his own table of grace.

R *“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”*

P Yet such promise for us does not come cheaply. Jesus, the living Word of God, does not only accompany us through the wilderness of our own sin, but follows the path that will lead him to the cross and all its shame.

R *“He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.”*

P We follow this suffering Servant Jesus to the cross so that we might behold his saving grace. We trust that he was willing to pay a great price for our sakes, in order that we all might be made whole in his righteousness and healed from all our despair.

R *“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”*

P At such great cost, God desires that all of humanity should be saved, and that none should perish.

R *“The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ... He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”*

P To be sure, in our own lives we may experience the despairing wilderness. We may come to suffer the truth of our guilt and shame, the disgrace of remorse and defeat, and even fear and anxiety in the shadows of death. But over all of that wilderness, we dare to trust that Jesus, the living Word of God, brings new grace for our lives.

R *Behold, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*

P He who would not break a bruised reed or extinguish a dimly burning wick, will indeed faithfully bring us to hope over all despair. Jesus, the living Word of God, is with us in our journey through the wilderness, and sees us through to the very promising end. We will be brought home in peace and joy.

R *“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace.”*

P Whenever our thoughts become dark and we are dying in the wilderness of our sins; whenever we are caught in the depths of despair and the harsh isolation of exile; whenever we cannot imagine anything possibly good for our lives and all our plans go to waste—there God comes in Jesus the Christ to shine light on our darkness. Do not despair! You shall not die, but live, and shall come to know the fullness of God’s grace and promise through Jesus the Christ! Then our darkened imaginations will give way to God’s own brilliant light.

*R “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”*

P Instead of defeat and despair, there are sure and certain signs of comfort and joy, healing and hope. We lay hold of this through our faith in Christ. Through faith, we get to declare the everlasting promises of God as though they are our very own to proclaim—even as they were for the prophet Isaiah. For we are witnesses of God’s living Word, Jesus the Christ; and through that Word we are blessed messengers of his good news!

*R “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”*