

Isaiah 40:1-5  
Wait With Strength  
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I thought I would begin this morning with something controversial. There's a topic that together we need to tackle. We need to wade into the waters of this issue.

How many of you know what this is?



This simple red and green design devoid of any other symbolism other than the Starbucks logo itself, is viewed by many as a capitulation to political correctness, many calling for a boycott of the coffee company with hashtags like #waronchristmas, #cupgate. Some are even going so far as to calling these Satan Cups. To which I want to offer my sensitive and very pastoral response: “Seriously?” “Get over it.”

Can you imagine God caring one iota about something like this? I mean, in just a few weeks, we will mark the anniversary of the night when God became a human, in a blustery barn, surrounded by farm animals—and people are getting worked up over the absence of Christmas Trees and snowflakes on their overpriced Lattes. When I read about stuff like this on the internet, this is the kind of thing that makes me want to hurl my laptop across my office. I hope you are picking up on my cynicism, because I'm laying it on pretty thick.

But what this essentially non-issue speaks to in our Christmas-crazed culture, especially among American Christians, is how, at this time of year, we look for—and even demand—that the world cater to our desire for ease and comfort.

Now by a show of hands, how many of you have ever got through the Christmas season and thought to yourself: “Gee whiz, I need a vacation from my holiday!”

This time of year, the word *comfort* conjures up images of La-Z-Boy chairs, tables full of comfort food, creature comforts, comfortable cars, comfortable shoes, comfortable homes with roaring fireplaces and feet propped up on stools. This is what we come to think of when we think of comfort. And when we hear passages like Isaiah 40 that was read for us today, we can't help but wonder, “Is this what God has in mind for us when God promises comfort to his people?”

To get a picture of what Isaiah meant by *comfort*, it will help us to understand the context of these words. The opening of chapter 40 breaks a nearly 200-year silence from God. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah serve as a warning to the people for their wickedness. Chapter 39 concludes as Isaiah outlines how Babylon will carry off Israel into exile, leaving Jerusalem utterly decimated. And then nothing, not a word from God, for 200 years. Sometimes silence can be terrifying; other times silence simply lulls us into complacency.

Now Israel's captivity in Babylon was not like it was in Egypt. They were not slaves in Babylon, life was not necessarily hard for the Hebrews in Babylon like it was in Egypt. They were able to have jobs, to buy property, to raise their families in peace.

**Jeremiah 29:5-6: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.**

The problem with life in Babylon was **not** that it was miserable; it was just dissatisfying, generic, blah. Life in Babylon was like that Starbucks cup. When our vision of what God is actually up to in our lives is so small, when it's addicted to just feeling good during the holidays, when we can't see past the trappings around us, well then coffee cups that deprive us of the most benign cheer imaginable, all of a sudden matter a great deal.

Israel was dislocated from Yahweh, her first love. And the way that sin manifested itself in them was apathy. When God is not first in our lives, sometimes our captivity is unbearable, painful, suffocating—that was what it was like in Egypt. But other times, everything just feels somehow off; we're living well enough, but well enough is never well enough. We want more and so we look for that deep connection with things that simply cannot provide—that's Babylon. Babylon is meant to dislocate, disintegrate us from our identity. In Babylon, Israel lost its sense of who she was, not by removing all evidence of hope, but by introducing false hopes. You can be pretty successful in exile. In Babylon, Israel's captivity was their apathy, lulled to complacency because things were for the most part...good enough.

You've heard the term "lose yourself" in your work, in your leisure activity, in another person? This is what Israel looked like with Babylon on the brain.

But friends, God's dream for your life is not just that it would just be "satisfactory." You were made for fellowship with the Creator of the universe, the one who thought up mountain ranges and the aurora borealis, the one who created super caves, supernovas, and Chevy Novas. The danger of exiled thinking is that you forget the Jesus Christ loves you and has grand plan for your life. If that's where you find yourself, weary from a good enough existence, it's time to start dreaming again.

But then after 200 years of silence, the tender voice of Yahweh is heard once again: "comfort." Comfort is an interesting word. It's actually a compound word, made up of two Latin roots: *cum* – with; and *fortis* – strength.

The mindset that God’s dream for us is that we would be just “good enough”... it takes a little something extra to snap us out of it. In our household, we call this “stinkin’ thinkin’.” To be caught in that whirlpool, takes strength to free us from its grip. God’s Word to the captives in Babylon is that your God is strong, he is a mighty deliverer. Comfort, be with strength, take strength, because I’m about to do something new.

In John chapter 15, Jesus commands that we be joined to him as a branch is to the vine. Because he knows that on our own, we will wither and die. But the promise is that when we abide in him and he in us, his joy will be in us and our joy will be full. The opposite of a good enough life, an apathetic life, is an abundant one—one in which our cups runneth over. Jesus again says to his followers in John 10, I’ve come so that you would have life to the full, life that runneth over.

A few months ago, we journeyed through Paul’s letter to the church at Thessalonica, and the refrain that echoed throughout, like so many others, was Paul’s prayer that they would abound with Faith, Hope, and Love. If your life is not abounding with these things, you may still be in Babylon, the wrong place.

The problem is that we keep taking detours, diversions, that we think will lead us there—even provide a short cut. Diversions like: the right job, or promotion, the right school, the right community, the right home, the right circle of friends, the right doctor, the right exercise regimen, even the right family. But really all we’re doing is straying from the path to peace, the way of comfort.

Then, in verse 3, “A voice cries out, ‘*In the wilderness* prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” The only way to get to Jerusalem is if God makes the way straight. Hear the words of the prophet, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” he said. “Make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord. Every valley *shall* be lifted up.” That is not your job description. It is a promise of what God will do. “Every mountain and hill made low... Then the glory of the Lord *shall* be revealed, and all people *shall* see it together.”

After confronting what is wrong, biblical comfort comes as an announcement from God. Smack in the middle of your desert, the highway of the God emerges, not so we can have the life we’ve always wanted, but so that God can get a hold of us. But we have to have the courage to step onto the onramp, because this highway—the one that runs right through the human heart—will take us directly to the heart of God.

This is why we celebrate Advent. We began this series with a phrase from the beloved Christmas Carol, reminding us this “weary world rejoices.” If you are weary from the rat race, if you are weary from *good enough* thinking, you can rejoice this Advent, because Christmas is our reminder that God is not done with your life—not by a long shot.

Author Walter Brueggemann gives this encouraging word: do not absolutize your present. Do not take it too seriously, because it will not last. God has dreams for your life, and he’s building a highway right in the middle of your wilderness to lead you there.

Advent is the time of year when we journey with God along the highway that eventually leads to Bethlehem. It's a hard road, because waiting on God is not always an easy thing. But choosing to wait upon God is choosing to believe in hope. There we can watch for the thin veneer between heaven and earth to break and for glory to be revealed.

Last night, we began decorating our home for Christmas, and it began as it always does, with setting up the wooden nativity scene. And as we were placing the figures in their historically correct placements, Christian said something amazing: "Is that really the baby Jesus?" I paused, because it's that sort of wonder and hope that we're being trained for this season.

Christmas is not found in having our favorite coffee company comfort us with vaguely meaningful branding; it's choosing to take a stand for hope. Christmas is keeping our eyes open for those moments where mystery and wonder pop, where, as Isaiah says: "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh will see it together." The most important work we do this month is not to "get ready" for the holiday, but to prepare for a holy day.