

The Road We Can't Yet See

Isaiah 40:1-11

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As 2020 winds down, I'm curious: what is one wonderful thing that God has done in your life in the past year?

Maybe it's a strange question to ask in a year when there's been so much hardship. In fact, it's been such a hard year for all of us that I sometimes think we've nearly forgotten how to talk about good things without feeling awkward about it or like we've brought up a taboo subject. It seems like talking about good and wonderful things in 2020 is sort of like deciding to sing "Walking on Sunshine" at a funeral. It's just not right!

But maybe talking about good and wonderful things is what we most need right now.

Four years ago Caroll Spinney retired. If that name rings a bell, it's because Spinney was one of the stars of *Sesame Street*, and though you may have never seen his face, I'm almost certain that you would know his voice. That's because Spinney was famous for playing *both* Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch.

When Spinney retired, he was 84-years old and had been playing those characters for nearly 50 years. I sometimes wonder if it was therapeutic for him to play both happy-go-lucky Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch. Think about it. In a single show, he would deliver comforting lines, like, "Bad days happen to everyone, but when one happens, just keep doing your best," and grouchy lines like, "Now leave me alone and get lost!"

One man brought to life both the tender, nurturing, childlike Big Bird, who when asked how he could still be six years old after being around so long, replied, "Just lucky, I guess," and the crabby, trash-talking, green monster, Oscar, who taught me the word, "Scram!" when I was still far too young to be saying it to my mother.

They are foils, aren't they? Big Bird and Oscar are yin and yang, Jekyll and Hyde, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito. And yet, unseen by us for fifty years, they were actually one and the same man. One man bringing to life and embodying both realities: it is almost too good to be true, especially when we feel so much like Oscar these days and so in need of a little more Big Bird in our lives.

During Advent, we throw around these "Big Bird" type words. We throw around words like hope and peace and joy and love.

But these words have their foils, too. They have their "Grouches." The opposite of hope is despair. The opposite of peace is discord. The opposite of joy is sorrow. The opposite of love is indifference.

And the thing is, like Caroll Spinney playing both Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch, our lives are jumble of all of those words, too. But maybe we have let Oscar have too much say lately.

Maybe what we most need this advent isn't to just dwell on all that has gone wrong, but to also reflect on all that *could be*. Maybe God is pressing us to stop dwelling on what's been, and to start looking toward what *might be*.

The truth is, it wouldn't be the first time that God has had to push his people to look past their present circumstances and toward a better tomorrow.

Today, most scholars agree that Isaiah, the court prophet after whom the book is named, had been dead for a very long time by the time we get to Isaiah, chapter 40. They say that there was roughly a 200 year gap between the thirty-ninth chapter of Isaiah and the fortieth chapter. What that means is that the first 39 chapters belong to the original Isaiah, but that at chapter forty, a new prophet began writing in Isaiah's name — which was a common practice in that day and time.

If you've read Isaiah, then you know that the first 39 chapters are mostly a scathing indictment of who Israel had become and the impending punishment God would mete out on Jerusalem. But then comes chapter 40, and the whole tone of the writing shifts from one of scathing indictment to one of comfort.

If all of that sounds confusing to you, let me simplify it this way: if the original Isaiah, or First Isaiah, were a character on *Sesame Street*, he would be Oscar the Grouch — and Second Isaiah would be the nurturing voice of Big Bird.

What we know historically is that some 200 years after the original Isaiah lived, Babylon did invade Jerusalem and utterly destroyed it. Everything that helped the people of God make sense of the world was razed to the ground. The temple was in ruins, the promised land invaded by an occupying power, and many of its best and brightest citizens taken as prisoners back to Babylon to serve its king and its gods.

It was the time of exile. And it is in this time of exile that Second Isaiah or "Isaiah of the Exile" picked up where the original prophet left off.

And, we have to understand that from the perspective of the people living in exile, there were really only two possible theological explanations for what had happened to Jerusalem: either God had utterly abandoned them or God had used Babylon to punish them. Hear the polarities in that thinking: God was either *nowhere* to be found or God *had orchestrated the whole thing*.

And the question with which both of those theological perspectives was wrestling was this: "Where is God in all of this?" Has God abandoned us? Is God using exile to punish us? Where is God?

It's a question that I suspect many of us have asked ourselves over the last year. The pandemic has created its own kind of exile for us, hasn't it? No, we haven't been invaded by an opposing military force and, no, our capitol city has not been razed to ground and, no, our best and brightest have not been hauled across the world to serve another nation.

But our way of life has been upended. For many of us, the long isolation caused by COVID has made us more than lonesome; we feel abandoned. For others, the economic impact has been debilitating — with millions of Americans paying for rent on their credit cards. Can you imagine repaying Colorado Springs rent at a 19% interest rate? And across the board, physicians and psychologists are reporting increased rates of anxiety, addiction, domestic violence, depression, and suicide.

Where *is* God in all of this? If ever we've needed the voice of Second Isaiah it is today.

Unlike his contemporaries, Second Isaiah does not say "Woe is us, for our God has abandoned us," nor "Woe is us, for our God has unleashed the hounds of Babylon upon us." Rather, this voice says:

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid." (Isa. 40:1-2)

It is an optimistic word compared to what his contemporaries were saying — perhaps maybe too optimistic, since the people of God were still in exile, still under the crushing weight of Babylon. But it's a vision of what he believed *could* be.

"In Paris in the 1920s, Pablo Picasso was asked to paint the portrait of the then young poet, Gertrude Stein. After months of work, Picasso unveiled the painting. People were shocked. The portrait resembled Miss Stein, but showed her as old, wise, and strong; nothing like the young, uncertain woman that they knew.

When they said, 'But that doesn't look like her,' Picasso responded, 'It will one day.' And it happened. The artist had a vision of what she would look and be like one day and framed the vision in his painting" (Brett Younger, "Longing for Peace," December 17, 2006).

Second Isaiah frames his vision in a prophecy of what *could* be — maybe not yet, but one day.

The people in exile would be comforted, would be forgiven, would be led as sheep by the Shepherd. Second Isaiah understood that God had not abandoned them, not even in exile. Instead, he pointed to a day when a voice would cry out:

"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.” (Isa. 40:3-4)

It's a metaphor about road construction. Prepare a way. Make it go straight through the desert. Add dirt to the low spots. Take dirt away from the high spots. Get the bulldozer out and make it nice and level. Fill in the potholes so that the road runs smooth.

Paul Stroble points out that the Hebrew language has two words for “road” or “way.” The first is *derekh*, and it's the kind of road that is more like a path formed by its constant use. Think of a game trail or the Appalachian Trail, worn down and made by the repeated impact of hooves and feet over time. The other word is *messilah*, which was a built-up, intentionally constructed, and improved road. It was a highway.

In that day and time, the most common roads were *derekhs* — those paths just worn into the ground by use. *Derekhs* had to climb over every hill and descend into every valley. They often meandered along, rarely taking a straight route.

Very few places had built up and improved highways. In fact, *messilas* or built highways were understood to be images and signs of peace and wellness. Only settled nations with a measure of peace and prosperity had highways (“Make straight a highway,” *The Christian Century*, 12/3/2012).

Our prophet imagines the construction of a super highway that would bring God's people out of exile and into *peace*.

You see, Second Isaiah understood that even when all feels lost, even we can't see it yet, even when we can't imagine what it might look like, God is at work — preparing a way where we thought there was no way.

For the Israelites in exile, that meant the hope of highway home to Judah. But what about for us? We aren't Israelites, longing for our homeland, so where would God's highway take us?

Are we hoping it will take us back to “normal?” Back to “the way things were?”

I once heard a sermon entitled “The Seven Last Words of a Dying Church.” Do you know what those seven last words were? Do you know the last words a church on its deathbed utters?

“We've never done it that way before.”

I don't know about you, but I have yet to see time march backwards.

Maybe our highway isn't about getting back to what was, but stepping into the unknown future of what *could* be — because we trust that God is still at work, even now, building a highway for our future.

Tom Long tells the story of how a week before Christmas, a church drama group presented a scaled down version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The church fellowship hall was transformed into a theater, folding chairs facing a makeshift stage with a painted backdrop of the tenements and sooty chimneys of nineteenth century London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some were amused to note that the part of the tightfisted Ebenezer Scrooge was being played by one of the saints of the church, a kind and gentle man of quite un-Scrooge-like generosity. They were impressed, though, by the skill and energy he brought to his part.

He growled his way through the opening scenes, ringing out every "Bah! Humbug!" with miserly ill will. He shivered with fright as he encountered the series of Christmas ghosts. The final scene called for a jubilant Scrooge to chase away the shadows of the dark night and greet the light of Christmas Day by flinging open his bedroom window and bellowing joyfully to the startled city street below: "Merry Christmas, everyone! Merry Christmas!"

Then Scrooge, wanting to bestow Christmas gifts upon the needy of London and looking for someone to help him dispense cheer, was to act as if he had spied a street urchin passing by. Scrooge shouted, "Hey, boy, you there!" pointing vigorously at this imaginary figure. "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you to do."

Then something unexpected happened. When the transformed Scrooge shouted from the window, "Come up here, boy. I've go something wonderful for you to do," a 6-year old boy in the audience, seated with his family, spontaneously rose from his chair and walked on stage, ready to do "something wonderful."

The actor playing Scrooge blinked in disbelief. There was now an unscripted child standing on center stage. What would they do? The audience held its breath. Then the saint beneath the veneer of Scrooge took charge. Bounding down from his window perch, he strode across the stage and cheerily embraced the waiting boy.

"Yes, indeed," he exclaimed his voice full of blessing. "You are the one, the very one I had in mind. We have some wonderful stuff to do" (*Pulpit Resource*, 12/22/1997, 50).

In a year when Oscar the Grouch has had too much control over our outlook, what if God is pointing at us, and with a voice full of blessing, saying, "You are the one, the very one I had in mind. We have some wonderful stuff to do?"

Will we be like Oscar and tell God to "Scram!?"

Will we say, "We've never done it that way before?"

Or will we trust that God is already preparing the road that *could* take us to something new and wonderful?

Amen.