

ISAIAH 40:1-5

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. <sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Matthew 11:28-30

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

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Litany of Penitence

L: We confess to you and one another our sinfulness. We have not loved you with our whole heart, mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.

**P: Have mercy on us, O God.**

L: We confess to you all our past unfaithfulness: the pride, hypocrisy, the impatience in our lives, and our self-indulgence and frustration at those who don't see things our way.

**P: We confess to you, O God.**

L: We confess our negligence in prayer and worship, our failure to commit ourselves fully to you in faith.

**P: We confess to you, O God.**

L: Accept our repentance and turn all our debts to you to ashes.

Accomplish in us we pray, the work of your salvation, that we may show forth your mercy and glory in the world.

**P: By the cross and suffering of our Savior, bring us with all the saints to the joy of Christ's resurrection. Amen**

Assurance of Pardon

L: Hear the good news! The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, that we might be dead to sin, and alive to all that is good. I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ our sin turned into ashes and we are forgiven. Amen

TODAY IS ASH WEDNESDAY WHEN THE LENTEN SEASON OFFICIALLY BEGINS.

IT'S A GOOD TIME TO REFLECT ON- NOT ONLY THINGS WE MIGHT WANT TO GIVE UP, BUT ALSO ON THE MANY LOADS THAT WE ARE CARRYING.

LENT IS ALSO A GOOD TIME TO FOCUS ON THE LORD, HIS GRACE IN OUR LIVES, AND HOW WE MAY RESPOND. LET US THEREFORE LOOK TO THE MESSAGE OF THE READINGS SO WE MAY USE THEM TO HELP US ON OUR LENTEN JOURNEY.

THE PROPHET ISAIAH'S PROCLAMATION TO ISRAEL THAT GOD HAS PARDONED THEM DRAW'S OUR ATTENTION TO HIS GRACE.

GOD SAID HE WOULD LEAD THEM FROM EXILE BACK HOME TO THE PROMISED LAND.

THIS WAS ALSO A CALL FOR THEM TO PREPARE FOR THAT JOURNEY. AND IN ORDER TO DO SO, THE PEOPLE ARE TOLD TO CLEAR AWAY THE OBSTACLES THAT IMPEDE THEIR PROGRESS TOWARDS GOD.

LENT ISSUES A SIMILAR SPIRITUAL CALL FOR CHRISTIANS, AS WE ARE ENCOURAGED TO MAKE USE OF THE PRE-EASTER SEASON, TO GROW IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

THE DEATH OF JESUS IS, OF COURSE A PAST EVENT, AND YET THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS DEATH CONTINUE ON. THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S SUFFERING AND DEATH IS AS TRUE TODAY AS IT WAS WHEN HE BREATHED HIS LAST BREATH.

AND WHILE LENT IS CERTAINLY NOT THE ONLY TIME OF YEAR CHRISTIANS CAN OR SHOULD FOCUS ON THE DEATH OF JESUS, IT DOES PROVIDE US WITH A GREATER REASON TO DO SO.

FURTHERMORE, OUR CHOICE TO ENGAGE IN, AN INTENTIONAL SPIRITUAL JOURNEY WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS- WILL SURELY IMPACT OUR EASTER WORSHIP THIS YEAR.

LET US THEREFORE TAKE THE FIRST FEW STEPS ON OUR JOURNEY WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS, SO WE MIGHT APPRECIATE HIS EMPTY TOMB ALL THE MORE.

AND IN ORDER TO BEGIN OUR TREK TO GOOD FRIDAY AND THEN EASTER, WE WOULD DO WELL TO FOLLOW ISAIAH'S ADVICE ABOUT CLEARING AWAY OBSTACLES.

THERE ARE SEVERAL NEW TESTAMENT MODELS OF CLEARING AWAY THOSE THINGS THAT INHIBIT OUR CLOSENESS TO GOD. FROM THE GOSPELS WE HAVE THE STORY OF JESUS' WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER AND FASTING, WHICH IS FOLLOWED BY TEMPTATION.

HIS ENDURANCE IN THE MIDST OF TEMPTATION IS A REMINDER THAT HIS ROAD IN LIFE WAS NOT AN EASY ONE.

OUR ROAD ALSO HAS DIFFICULTIES, SO LET US LEARN FROM JESUS TO TRUST IN GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. LET US ALSO, LIKE JESUS DID, MAKE USE OF THE HELP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SCRIPTURE.

FOR EXAMPLE: FROM FIRST CORINTHIANS WE ARE GIVEN A REMINDER ABOUT THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT. IT IS THERE THAT THE CHURCH IS CALLED THE BODY OF CHRIST.

EPHESIANS OFFERS US MILITARY IMAGERY. CHAPTER SIX SPEAKS OF CHRISTIANS PUTTING ON THE ARMOR OF GOD SO WE MAY BE BETTER EQUIPPED FOR THE SPIRITUAL BATTLE.

FINALLY, WE HAVE THE METAPHOR OF RUNNERS IN A LONG-DISTANCE RACE THAT THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS PROVIDES. WE ARE REMINDED THAT RUNNERS MUST FIRST LAY ASIDE THE THINGS THAT CAN HINDER THEIR ABILITY TO RUN.

JESUS MODELS THIS FOR US. PART OF HIS TIME IN THE WILDERNESS WAS MEANT TO ENABLE HIM TO LAY ASIDE HIS WORK AS A CARPENTER, AS WELL AS SOME OTHER PARTS OF HIS LIFE, IN ORDER TO BEGIN HIS MINISTRY.

LETTING GO OF THINGS, OR CHANGING OUR RELATIONSHIPS, IS SOMETIMES A NECESSARY SACRIFICE IN ORDER TO BE FREE TO TAKE UP THE BURDEN JESUS CALLS US TO CARRY WITH HIM.

THUS, DURING LENT, AS WE ENTER A WILDERNESS OF SORTS, WE ARE ASKED TO CONSIDER WHAT WE NEED TO PUT DOWN, OR TAKE UP, ON OUR JOURNEY WITH THE LORD.

FOR EXAMPLE: EACH OF US IS BURDENED BY VARIOUS HABITS, DREAMS, REGRETS, GUILT, AND OTHER MEMORIES, THAT WEIGH US DOWN AND DISTRACT US FROM OUR GOAL.

\ THIS BRINGS US TO THE WELL-KNOWN VERSES FROM MATTHEW CHAPTER ELEVEN, IN WHICH JESUS CALLS TO THOSE WEIGHED DOWN IN THE WORLD.

HOWEVER, THE SAVIOR'S CALL TO THOSE WHO ARE BURDENED TO PUT HIS YOKE UPON THEIR SHOULDERS SOUNDS OUT OF PLACE, IT DOES NOT MAKE SENSE.

MANY OF US ARE ALREADY CARRYING MORE THAN OUR SHARE OF PERSONAL BURDENS, CONCERNS FOR OTHERS, AND CONCERN FOR CONDITIONS IN LIFE AROUND THE WORLD.

HOW CAN WE FIND THE TIME AND ENERGY TO DO ONE MORE THING, OR LIFT A NEW BURDEN, EVEN IF IT IS JESUS WHO ASKS?

A REFLECTION ON SPIRITUAL LIFE OFFERS A SOLUTION, WHICH IS TO LOOK TO THE LORD, JUST LIKE JESUS INVITES US TO DO. IT SAYS:

“GOD THE CREATOR OF TIME, HAS GIVEN US THE KEYS TO LEADING A LIFE THAT MAY BE CHALLENGING BUT NOT OVERWHELMING.

...GOD HAS HARD-WIRED US TO THRIVE WHEN WE OBEY HIM, EVEN WHEN IT SEEMS HIS INSTRUCTION DEFY COMMON SENSE.

...GOD OFFERS US TOOLS TO DO WHAT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE AND YET COME AWAY REFRESHED AND RENEWED.”

THESE TOOLS ARE CALLED SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OR BETTER YET, HOLY HABITS. WHEN WE TAKE UP WHAT GOD ORDAINS, IT TRANSFORMS TIME AS WELL.

THE HABITS INCLUDE THINGS LIKE: BIBLE STUDY, CONFESSION, FASTING, REPENTANCE, FORGIVENESS, GRATITUDE, ACTS OF CHARITY, SABBATH REST, WORSHIP, AND PRAYER.

THESE HOLY HABITS OR SPIRITUAL PRACTICES, ARE ALL GEARED TO LEAD US TO A PLACE WHERE WE CAN ALLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT TO WORK IN US AND THROUGH US.

GOD'S PROMISE IS THAT THE SPIRIT WILL GRANT US THE POWER AND STRENGTH TO DO THE THINGS WE CAN'T DO ON OUR OWN, WHEN WE CONNECT OUR LIVES TO CHRIST.

THIS HAPPENS BECAUSE WE ARE DRAWN INTO MORE INTIMACY WITH GOD AND HIS WILL. AND IT IS THERE WE FIND TIME TO DO WHAT WE THOUGHT THERE IS NO TIME FOR.

HOLY HABITS MAY SEEM LIKE A BURDEN TO US, BUT THEY ARE ACTUALLY PATHS TO RENEWAL, JUST LIKE JESUS PROMISED.

AND SO AS WE TAKE THE FIRST STEP ON OUR LENTEN JOURNEY, MAY ASHES BE A REMINDER OF OUR HUMAN FRAILTY, AND OUR DEPENDENCE UPON JESUS OUR SAVIOR.

MAY THEY REMIND US OF GOD'S PROMISE OF MERCY AND COMPEL US TO BE MERCIFUL AND FORGIVING.

MAY WE CHALLENGE OURSELVES THIS LENT TO TAKE UP THE BURDEN OF A NEW HOLY HABIT, OR RENEW AN OLD ONE.

LET US PRAY:

HEAR OUR PRAYER O LORD, AS WE BEGIN OUR LENTEN JOURNEY. WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FROM DUST WE COME, AND TO DUST WE WILL RETURN. WE GIVE YOU THANKS FOR THE SALVATION JESUS PROVIDES AND FIND COMFORT AND HOPE THAT WE BELONG TO YOU. WE PRAY YOU WILL BLESS US NOW, AT THE BEGINNING OF LENT. HEAR OUR REGRETS, OUR PRAYERS, OUR DREAMS. HELP US TO PUT ON THE YOKE JESUS OFFERS, AND KEEP US CLOSE TO YOU, NOW AND FOREVER. IN CHRIST'S NAME WE PRAY. AMEN