

**Isaiah 40:1-11 (Reflective Reading)**<sup>1</sup>  
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**Voice:**

Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God (v. 1).  
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 (v.2).

**Preacher:**

Surely, it is good news to the Jewish exiles in Babylon  
awaiting the overthrow of the Babylonian empire  
by the might of the Persian King, Cyrus.  
Yet I am not sure it is time for our people  
to be comforted by such good tidings.  
Our realities do not stir up our optimism;  
our personal and corporate sins are too heavy to be lifted:  
Genocide of Native Americans, slavery, white supremacy . . .  
misogyny, phobias, hate crimes, and terrorism. . . .  
The deeper we look into the past,  
the less certain we are of forgiveness;  
the closer we look at the present,  
the less able we feel to comfort the people.

**Voice:**

A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God (v. 3).  
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 (v. 4).  
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (v.5).

**Preacher:**

The wilderness is a habitat for serpents and scorpions,  
a desert of hunger, thirst, and death.  
Indeed, we are living in a wilderness,  
a place of danger, hardship, and brutality,

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<sup>1</sup> This writing is crafted as the first part of the sermon that is going to be preached at the 2017 Academy of Homiletics Conference on December 9, 2017. The text is from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Second Sunday of Advent.

caused by hatred, violence, and arrogance.  
Can the wilderness be transformed into the Lord's place,  
the death-dealing desert into a life-giving oasis,  
where all people shall see the glory of God together?  
To construct such a highway,  
those who live on the mountains of pride must be humbled,  
those who live in the valleys of despair must rise up,  
and those who hate each other must be friends.  
Is this all possible?  
Can this be our reality?  
Even though the Lord has spoken, I wonder. . . .

**Voice:**

A voice says, "Cry out!"

**Preacher:**

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

**Voice:**

"All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field (v.6).  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass (v. 7).  
The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever (v. 8).

**Preacher:**

Gratitude for those words of wisdom!  
All things are indeed changing.  
The arrogance of the Babylonians and the pride of the Romans  
who thought that their empires would last forever,  
were like dry grass under a hot wind.  
All the principalities in the world,  
even White America,  
are controlled by God's breath.  
Certainly, God's justice and righteousness endure forever.

**Voice:**

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (v. 9).  
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him (v. 10).

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 (v. 11).

**Preacher:**

God's presence within me and around me brings comforts.  
God is the source of our comfort and hope,  
God strengthens us to comfort others.  
God, who is all tenderness and compassion,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
is gracious to forgive our sins when we repent.  
The God of forgiveness leads us to reconciliation,  
and calls us to urgently proclaim to the whole world,  
the good tidings that the salvation of God is at hand.  
Wherever this gospel is proclaimed,  
there is a new beginning—

a new beginning in North America,  
a new beginning in Australia,  
sae-ro-un si-jak (a new beginning in Korean) in Asia,  
un Nuevo comienzo (a new beginning in Spanish) in South America,  
mwanzo mpya (a new beginning in Swahili) in Africa,  
bidayatan jadida (a new beginning in Arabic) in the Middle East,  
and mia nea archi (a new beginning in Turkish) in Europe.