

Comfort and hope (Isaiah 40:1-11)

There is comfort, and then there is comfort.

by [Dennis Sanders](#)

December 8, 2017

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Around this time of the year, I look forward to my mother's cooking. She's in her 80s now and doesn't cook as much as she used to, but every so often she will make the foods that I love: macaroni and cheese, cornbread dressing, and sweet potato pie. I eat these foods at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I feel a sense of home. When your world is crazy, having a bit of your favorite comfort food makes you feel good and more able to cope with a changing environment.

But there is comfort and there is comfort. A slice of sweet potato pie is nice on a bad day. But what if you've been sitting in San Juan for months, waiting and waiting for the lights to come on after the hurricane?

Isaiah 40 opens up Second Isaiah, written to a community in exile. It had not been a good time in the life of many Jews. A century before, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Many people were taken away to live in a foreign land, never to return. Others became refugees who streamed to the Southern Kingdom. Then the Southern Kingdom fell to the new superpower, the Babylonians. Again some people were forced to live in exile, while others were stuck in the ruins of post-apocalyptic Judah.

Israel was gone. Judah was gone. The king was gone. The temple was gone. Everything they once knew was gone forever. They sat in Babylon, wondering if it would ever come back.

God responds with comfort. "Comfort, comfort my people." God is no longer angry that God's chosen people have walked away. God wants the people back. God calls the people to build a highway for God, a way that God can be with the people again. God tells the people that their post-apocalyptic world will be hopeful, because God cares for God's people. God then tells them to proclaim the good news to all people.

This was a message of hope to the exilic community in Babylon. *Things are terrible now, but take comfort: there is a tomorrow.* God had not left the Israelites alone.

As I'm writing this, I think of my relatives in Puerto Rico, living in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. I think of those who are trying to get their lives back to some sense of normal after witnessing a horrific mass shooting. Around the world, people are seeking comfort, seeking something that will take away the pain.

As followers of Jesus, we can't magically take away the pain of those hurting. But maybe we can be bearers of great comfort, comfort greater than the best mac and cheese. In a world where there are mass shootings and category five hurricanes, we believe that even if the world ends, God is there. God doesn't end. We believe that God in Christ will bring hope in a land filled with despair.