

Haftarah

'Comfort, O comfort my people'



*A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are like grass,
their constancy is like the flower of
the field...*

*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!'*

Isaiah 40:6,9

Connection

This Haftarah is the first of seven *haftarot* [plural of *haftarah*] known as 'the seven of consolation' which are read in the weeks leading up to Rosh HaShanah (Jewish New Year). In the Jewish liturgical calendar this Haftarah is read on the Sabbath after *Tisha b'Av*. *Tisha b'Av* is a day of fast, mourning the destruction of the Temple in 587 BCE and the beginning of the Babylonian exile. With this important fast day behind us, the Haftarah now speaks of hope and pending liberation for the exiles.

Background

Isaiah 40 is regarded as the beginning of 'Second Isaiah' (Isaiah 40-66), i.e., a set of prophecies and traditions associated with a prophet living among the exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BCE, around the time of the decree of King Cyrus. This decree would eventually allow for the return of the Judean exiles to their homeland. Isaiah 40 opens with words of consolation to the exiles in view of the saving figure of Cyrus. Despite the impact of the new political situation, the prophet does not use words of political freedom but rather words which proclaim a heavenly source of comfort and restoration.

Ponder

This Haftarah is comprised of two main sections:

Isaiah 40:1-11. A series of prophecies of consolation:

- It can be confusing to know who is speaking to who in this passage. One opinion is that it can be read as the prophet overhearing the interaction between God and divine emissaries charged with the task of bringing comfort to Zion. The prophet announces what he hears to the people.
- Around a mealtable, try role-playing the various voices as you distinguish them... a creative way to *hear* and be immersed in the Word of God.

Isaiah 40:12-26. A series of questions regarding God's unfathomable depths.

- If you were to categorize these questions, arrange their themes, how would you do so?
- The questions are rhetorical; no answer is expected. But if you *were* to answer them, how would you do so? What is the prophet really saying?
- Note the striking imagery, with human-like characteristics applied to God; e.g., '[God] stretches out the heaven like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in' (v.22).

Discuss

In the scriptures we hear again and again the cry for divine help, and the trust that God can and will respond. Share your thoughts on this statement, and how such themes are part of your own faith journey.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002). Scripture quotations: NRSV.