Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

**Introduction**

There are a few stray biblical verses that have always teased my mind without coalescing into a coherent answer. At least nothing that I’d be willing to say definitively. The earliest in this vein is in Genesis 15:16 when God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in Egypt for 400 years before they receive the promised land. They’d come back in the 4th generation – yeah, it doesn’t quite make sense 400 years and 4 generations – but they’d come back when the sin of the Canaanites is made full. That is connected with a warning Moses gives to Israel in Leviticus 18:28 that they should be careful of committing certain abominations because they make the land unclean and it will vomit you out as it did the nation before you. There is some multigenerational clock on sins and connection to a land.

Then there is the summary of the 10 commandments in Exodos 20:5, “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me.” That’s the closest I come to that 4th generation. The traditional understanding of this is simply that we have to live with the effects of sin. Unrepentant sin can become generational sin. The sins the son sees the father commit often become his own sins. That patterns are set and never repented or changed.

There are some other similar verses. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they must, “fill up the measure of their fathers who killed the prophets.” The Apostle Paul echoes that in 1 Thessalonians 2:16 complaining of the Jews who “hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved-- so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.” But then he says that “wrath has come upon them at last.”

There is a mystery in the hardening of hearts and the merciful work of God.

**Text**

Our Old Testament reading is placed and one of those discontinuities between a generation where the sin is made full and on the one that comes after. Isaiah 39, the last addressed to Isaiah’s contemporaries, ends with Hezekiah’s cynical deal. He’s shown everything in the palace to the Babylonian representative, and Isaiah tells him that everything they saw will be taken to Babylon and sons of his own flesh shall be eunuch in Babylon. And Hezekiah nonchalantly says, “’The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days.’” There is no longer any reason to prophesy to his contemporaries because even Hezekiah is on autopilot. The sins have been saved up and will pass to the next generation with repentance. And the land will spit them out. Hezekiah is just happy to know it isn’t in his generation. The ruination will take another. He will have peace and security.

And so Isaiah starts to preach or write for a generation not yet born, a generation in exile, a generation long after the sin is made full and the land has spit them out. And generation that might wonder if the covenant is still real without the promised land and temple,

“Comfort, comfort my people, says you God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.”

No longer the harsh words of the prophets demanding repentance that would not come. No longer the words of conviction of corruption. But words of comfort. Tender words to bind the wounds.

“Cry to her.” Go out into the streets. Go door to door with this message. “her warfare is ended, her iniquity pardoned.” That sin that compounded down the generations and came to a stop on you, it is expunged. The constant struggle in the time of the kings, the constant warfare against Egypt and Babylon, against each other North and South, against the LORD himself and his statutes and ordinances that were never kept. That warfare is over. “she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” More than Lincoln’s 2nd inaugural invocation that the sins of 250 years were being visited by the sword and all one can say is “the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Israel had received double. And God would repay. Because his judgements are true and righteous.

**Christology**

And what form would his recompense take?

Yes, Israel would return from exile, but that is not the promise that Isaiah foresees. Isaiah sees something much greater. The herald, the forerunner of God, appearing. A voice crying in the wilderness, “make straight the paths.” A voice testifying, “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

And that is the Baptist’s message. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” All those generations of sin piled upon the earth. This one has come to break the generational chains of sin. The one who came to turn the hearts of the fathers toward the children and the children to the fathers. No longer bound in sin and its effects, but in love.

That is the Baptist’s message, “I baptize you with water for repentance for the forgiveness of sins…but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The repentance that prepares the way and makes it straight, so that the Holy God might dwell with us. The glory of the LORD, which is his grace. Grace that restores us not just to a temporal promised land, but that promises us eternal life.

Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Her warfare is ended. Her champion has comes and shall defeat her enemies. Shall cast our Satan. Shall throw down all thrones and dominions. Shall forgive the sin that dwells in our members. The burden is no longer on us. One we could never carry. It has been taken by Christ. And the glory of the LORD is see on that cross. This is God’s grace for all of us. Your exile from God is ended. And the Holy Spirit has been given to you.

**Moral**

Today, all flesh is like grass. That generational sin inherited from Adam continues to wreck it curse generation after generation. The flesh like the promised land continues to expel the spirit. The grass withers and the flower fades when the breath of the LORD clows on it. And make no mistake, that breathe of the LORD has blown on us. We have the breath of God in us. But this sinful flesh cannot long carry it. The grass withers and the flower fades. But know that the Word of the LORD endures forever.

That WORD includes you. He spoke your name and you shall know it again. He has called you his own. And he has promised the resurrection body. We are waiting that final word when the new heavens and the new earth are spoken into being. Of Which Christ our brother is the first.

Today while this grass fades, we still live by the Word of God.

Today we break those generational chains through repentance.

Today we dedicate ourselves to living in the Spirit.

Today we hear the distant triumph song and hearts are brave and arms are strong for one more spell.

**Eschatological**

For tomorrow, the LORD GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Tomorrow he comes not in grace, but his rewards is with him and his recompense before him.

Tomorrow he will tend his flock like a shepherd himself and gather them in his arms.

Today we prepare. Like all Judea going out to be baptized confessing their sins.

Tomorrow the mighty one appears. The one whose sandals we are not worthy to untie, and yet he shall make his home among us. No longer is sacrament and sign, but all flesh shall see him together.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken, and the Word of the LORD endures forever. Amen.