



## An Old Woman and the Sermon of Second Isaiah

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*She sits in her room facing the door. Her withered body sinks into the faded royal blue chair. Fine white hair is set into a hair net. Wrinkles have shaped her mouth into a hard grimace that never leaves her thin face. Strong lenses on her glasses make it difficult to tell where she is looking. They hide her expression and make it impossible for her to look into the eyes of anyone else. Her right knee is bound with a bulky ace bandage. Her bony legs look incapable of supporting her weight. A metal walker sits directly in front of her chair, making it look like she is sitting in a cage.*

“I can’t walk anymore. I sit here in this chair and watch the people walking past my door, but I can’t walk anymore. It’s my knees—they’re not strong. It’s Saturday, today, one o’clock, right?”

Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
“My way is hid from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God”?  
Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary,  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increases strength.  
Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;  
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:27-31)

At the age of eighty-four this woman is exiled to a 10' x 12' room in a nursing home. She laments the inability to walk which binds her to her chair. Her face hardly shows expression, and her voice seldom attempts to wield any power. Her ways are hidden; she is imprisoned in her

weakening body. Is it possible that the sermon of Second Isaiah can speak to the exhaustion of an old woman?

The frustration experienced by the prophet's original audience certainly equaled that of this old woman. They were exiled in Babylon with little hope of freedom. Their feeling of futility and estrangement from God is reflected in their lament, "My way is hid from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God" (Isa 40:27).

This individual lament speaks for the whole people of exiled Israel. The same can be said for the old woman. Her individual lament speaks for an ever increasing population of elderly persons in our society who suffer alone, often without a voice.

If a connection can be made between the laments of this old woman and of the exiled Israelites, cannot the comfort and the promise of return given by God to the exiled Israelites be given to her as well?

The prophet proclaimed God to be active in specific events. God would work through such events to bring about an earthly salvation from the oppression that was holding God's people. But do we today proclaim that God will bring an earthly salvation to an old woman suffering from the specific event of old age? Should we?

The strength of God is certainly not the issue: "The Lord is the everlasting God...He does not faint or grow weary" (Isa 40:28). Comfort comes with the assertion that God is quite capable of working salvation. In a lovely poetic image, God's salvation gives "wings like eagles" (v. 31). But will God give eagle's wings, in the form of a strengthened right knee, to an old woman who is no longer able to walk?

The promise that comes to the exiled Israelites—"They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (v. 31)—is a proclamation of return. But the idea of return is more difficult to apply to the situation of the old woman. Is it not the case that her inability to walk simply marks a bridge she has crossed on her journey through life?

Other bridges are best burned once crossed, like those of the three-year-old who no longer perceives the world as revolving around her or of the new parent who is no longer able to think only in terms of his own ambitions. If that is so, then would it be a good thing for this old woman to duck back under a bridge that she has already crossed? Would she really want to go back to an earlier time? As Woody Allen puts it in the movie *Hannah and her Sisters*, "That means...I'll have to sit through the Ice Capades again. Tch. It's not worth it."

Ultimately, there is no salvation from old age. Would it be a good thing then for God to give her back the use of her knee only for her eventually to lose it again?

But if there is no message of restoration and return for the woman, than how can the reassurance that God is strong and powerful be of any comfort to her? What becomes of the prophet's sermon of strength in the

face of the reality that the woman's strength is not increasing but decreasing? Today she knows that it is Saturday and one o'clock—but even this strength of coherence will decrease, not increase. What then of her lament? If there is no promise of freedom from her worn-out body and the specific event of old age, has her lament gone unheard?

These questions reflect the post-enlightenment demand for proof. They make the assumption that all problems must be solved in order for a "real" salvation to have taken place.

Yet, in the Babylonian exile, the first generation did not return; they died in Babylon—of old age. And though God did not act until after their death, God still heard their cry. Our thinking, our ways, and our strength are absolutely limited vis-à-vis those of God (55:8, 9). Hence, there can be comfort in waiting—waiting with hope in God’s higher thoughts, higher ways, higher strength. If such a God is involved with the old woman, then her faded royal blue chair is not the limit of her existence.

*Alongside her is a wall covered with pictures. In the center is a large, but fading, brown-and-white portrait of two teenaged boys in their best suits and a teenaged girl in her best dress (which looks to be from the '40s). Below that is a black-and-white photo of three laughing children wearing old-fashioned bathing suits by a lake. Encircling these photographs is an array of school pictures and family portraits from church directories. A few snapshots show off the most recent generation of the family.*

“Yes, I had three children, but they’re gone now. No, they are not dead; they’re all busy. You’re young. What are you doing here?”

But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.”  
“Can a woman forget her sucking child,  
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?  
Even these may forget,  
yet I will not forget you.  
Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands;  
your walls are continually before me.” (Isa 49:14-16)

Judging from the pictures on the wall, this old woman is not only a mother, but a grandmother, and a great-grandmother as well. Yet, this identity no longer brings her the vital role of authority in her family that it once gave. It is she who now depends on them rather than they who depend on her. She keeps their pictures carefully preserved on her wall, but she feels forsaken by her children who are the fruit of her life’s work.

Here again her lament parallels the cry of those exiled from Jerusalem: “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me” (Isa 49:14). They continued to worship God, but there was no answer. For the exiled, the fact that God had allowed the devastation meant that God had been defeated. They were no longer special and set apart.

There is a tremendous equalizing force at work among the elderly. Much more often, however, it is the proud who are humbled rather than the lowly who are lifted up. Fortunes are lost to health care costs. Thus, in nursing homes, the once-powerful businessman is now the roommate of a pensionless worker. And those who took pride in making a contribution to society are not distinguished from those who did not. The loving, giving

mother who nurtured her children is visited by them equally as often—or equally as seldom—as the mother who was neglecting and unaffectionate.

“Perpetual perishing,” John Locke’s term describing the eventuality of all things, speaks to the situation of the elderly, who along with being kept out of sight are more and more kept out

of mind. Time brings to an end even their greatest work. In time almost everything they were and everything they did will be forgotten. This woman has come to understand that her participation in the world no longer means interacting with the young who are involved with living: “You’re young. What are you doing here?”

The Lord through Second Isaiah counters the lament of forsakenness with a powerful image of God as a mother who will not forget her nursing child. The realistic prophet goes on to recognize the harsh reality of human nature as he adds, “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (49:15). It is a strong word of comfort for an old woman who has, for all practical purposes, been forgotten in the day-to-day lives of her children. But God has not forgotten the deep meaning and significance of her life—preserved in the photographs on her walls.

*Her back is to the window. It is a bright warm day, and sunlight streams into the timeless stillness of the room making shadows on the floor. Like Plato’s cave-dwellers, she doesn’t look out.*

*But then there’s nothing to see—it’s all concrete, with just a few patches of brown grass.*

“No, don’t read to me. You’re wearing pants. No, I don’t ever wear them. Why don’t you say something?”

A voice says, “Cry!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All flesh is grass,

and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades,

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;

surely the people is grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isa 40:6-8)

What shall I cry? What is the point of her time-biding, suffering existence? She sits day after day inside a window that reveals no hope. For her there is nothing new under the sun. At one time, she experienced new things in her life. She once knew the joy of beauty and the thrill of discovering truth. Once, she experienced the rejuvenating newness of love. But now she is tired—finished with new things. Her life has a sadly static quality.

Henri Matisse often used windows in his paintings to put a perspective on reality. The windows suggest that art provides a means for looking away from reality in order really to see it. Through his windows one’s view is directed outside in order to see back inside the room. But the grass seen from the window of the nursing home is brown, not green. The woman doesn’t look out at it, but I do. She asks me for a word, but the word I have for her is about death, not life.

People are like grass; they wither and fade. They are at one time beautiful and serve a contributing purpose; but their time passes, and ultimately

they live at the whim of the breath of death blown by the Lord. But the image of dead grass is transformed by the prophet. Suddenly he contrasts human frailty with the absolute steadfastness of the Word of the Lord (v. 8). Outside the window of human finitude is a view of the infinite,

everlasting Word of our God.

Still, inside the room, the old woman is tired. She hasn't the strength to walk. She fears that her life will soon be forgotten. She hasn't the hope to look beyond her present reality. But the promise of Second Isaiah came to a people who were like her—without hope, unable to move from where they sat. The promise was immediate. The creative power of the Word of God was transforming the present age, the prophet said. And that Word began with comfort.

Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God. (Isa 40:1)

“You go now. Your visit's done. Do you want to brush my hair? There's a brush on the table.”

I did.