

Despite the beautiful weather, the gentle breeze and relatively low humidity for this time of year, her face hardly showed expression, and she barely said a word. Her thoughts were mostly hidden, but her demeanor spoke volumes.

Is it possible that the words of Isaiah can speak at all to her life situation?

The frustration experienced by the prophet's original audience certainly equaled that of this elderly woman.

These people were exiled in Babylon, taken as captives hundreds of miles from their homes, with no hope of freedom. Their feeling of futility and separation from God is expressed in their words, "My way is hid from the Lord, and justice due me is disregarded by my God." (40:27).

These words speak for the whole people of exiled Israel. The same can be said for this woman. (Lily is her name.) Her personal woes speak for an ever-increasing population of elderly men and women in our society who suffer alone, often without a voice. Maybe you know someone in this situation (and I bet you do.)

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

The prophet proclaimed God to be active in specific events. God would work through particular historical circumstances to bring about an earthly salvation from the oppression that was imprisoning 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." Comfort comes with the assertion that God is quite capable of bringing salvation. In a lovely poetic image, as 'quotable a quote' as there is in the Bible, God's salvation gives "wings like eagles." 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"—is a proclamation of return.

But the idea of return is more difficult to apply to the situation of this woman. Isn't it 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 sees the world as revolving around her or of the brand 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 woman to duck back under a bridge that she has already crossed? Would she really want to go back to an earlier time, to relive a significant portion of life all over again? As Woody Allen puts it in the movie 'Hannah and her Sisters', "That means...I'll have to sit through the Ice Capades all over again. Tsch. It's not worth it."

Ultimately, as we well know, 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 this woman, then how can the reassurance that God is strong and powerful be of any comfort to her? What becomes of the prophet's words of strength in the face of the reality that her strength is not increasing but decreasing? Today she knows that it is Thursday and one o'clock—but even this strength of coherence will decrease, not increase. What then of her prayer?

If there is no promise of freedom from her worn out body and the continuing challenges of old age, has her lament gone unheard?

These questions reflect our modern demand for proof, for an accurate answer to any and every question we can raise. They make the assumption that all problems must be fully 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 predicated on the ways of God.

So truly, there *can* be comfort in waiting—waiting with hope in God's thoughts, God's ways, God's strength; in waiting for more than just our needs alone, as well—because life is not all just about us.

If such a God is involved with Lily on the bench, then her ever-present wheelchair is not the limit of her existence.

Chatting with Lily, I had a flashback to when I was talking with my mother's nursing home roommate, some years back. She had moved in as a permanent resident, or so she said. No one

would visit her at her home, she claimed- so she decided to take up residence where there were people around. (I never really checked her story out- but it made some sense to me.)

I remember her room (or half-room) very clearly. The wall alongside her bed was covered with pictures, from the floor to nearly the ceiling. In the center was 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 looked to be from the '50's.) Below that was a black-and-white photo of three laughing children wearing old-fashioned bathing suits by a lake. Encircling these photographs was an array of school pictures and family portraits from church directories. A few Polaroid snapshots showed off the most recent generation of the family.

"Yes, I had three children", - I remember her saying- "but they're gone now. No, they're not dead; they're all busy. They live somewhere else."

*But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me,
my Lord has forgotten me.'*

*"Can a woman forget her nursing 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 her wall, she was not only a mother, but a grandmother and a great-grandmother as well. Yet this identity no longer brought 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 feels forsaken by her children who are the fruit of her life's work.

Here again she 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 deportation meant that God had been defeated. They were no longer special and set apart.

There is a tremendous equalizing force at work among many elderly people we don't often acknowledge, for whatever reason. Often it is the proud who are humbled rather than

the lowly who are lifted up. Fortunes are lost to health care costs. In nursing homes, the once well-heeled businessman is now the roommate of a pension less worker. And those who took pride in making a contribution to society are not distinguished from those who did not. They visit the loving, giving mother who nurtured her children equally as often—or equally as seldom—as the mother who was neglecting and unaffectionate.

"Languishing" is a term often used to speak to the situation of many elderly folks, who sometimes, 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. -----

Through Isaiah the Lord counters the reality of parental forsakenness with a powerful image of God as a mother who will not forget her child.

The prophet recognizes the harsh reality of human nature with true words of comfort; "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (49:15).

It is a strong word of comfort for many who have, for all practical purposes, been forgotten in the day-to-day lives of their children.

But God does not forget the deep meaning and significance of any human life—preserved in photographs on her walls or memories held deep in human hearts.

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,

People are like grass; they wither and fade. So it goes.

We are all at one time beautiful enough and serve a contributing purpose; but time passes, and ultimately we all live at the whim of the breath of death blown by the Lord.

But the prophet transforms this image of dead grass. Suddenly the state of human frailty is thrown up against the steadfastness of the Word of the Lord. Beyond the window of human frailty is the truth of the infinite, ever-lasting Word of our God.

Still, even atop the mountain where Lily and I sat, at 10 AM Thursday morning, she was tired. She hadn't the strength to walk, even if her knee was healed. She fretted that her life will soon be forgotten. She didn't have the hope to look beyond the day she was living in.

And, the promise of Isaiah came to a people who were just like her—without hope, unable to move from where they sat.

The promise was real and lasting. The creative power of the Word of God was transforming the present age, into an age to come, the prophet said. And that Word began with comfort.

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

Lily and I spy a mountain hawk, soaring on the thermal, the breeze rising up the side of the mountain, up from the Delaware River valley below- wings motionless, teetering back & forth, still but soaring...

Then she says, to no one in particular,

“Only when you sit still, can you feel the updraft...”

When I’m here, I don’t have to move to feel the presence of God underneath me. I don’t have to do a thing to feel God. It lifts me up. God just lifts me up.”

I have to agree with her. Amen.