

(Isaiah 40:1-11) RSV Adapted

God: (To the Divine Council)

Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Divine Council: (To Isaiah)

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Isaiah: (To God and the Council)

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.

Divine Council: (To Isaiah)

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. 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, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.



## The People Is Grass

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Text: Isaiah 40:1-11.

Lame Beaver learned a saying from his mother, and she learned it from hers, and many generations before them learned it in the same way, each from their mothers; Lame Beaver learned a saying from his mother, and it went; "Only the rocks live forever." As a young Arapaho boy, he learned to apply this saying to the fleeting nature of the games he played. One day he would run faster, score more; he would win and be at the center of attention. The next day, however, someone would run even faster, or he himself a bit slower; and he would lose. And he would have to remind himself, "Only the rocks live forever."

As he grew older, Lame Beaver became an Arapaho warrior and chieftain. The stakes in winning and losing became higher. They were not so frivolous as a footrace or a lacrosse game among boyhood friends. The tribe's clashes with the Comanche and the Pawnee were for real. The fortunes of the Arapaho rose and fell according to each outcome. And as Lame Beaver rode into battle after battle, a warrior for his people, he knew each time the tribe might incur great losses of men or of hunting grounds, or that it might be the last battle for him. For only the rocks live forever.

Lame Beaver became accustomed to the capricious nature of life. In the games and the battles these were familiar concerns. They had been the same fickle unknowns for generations. But Lame Beaver, in his lifetime, saw new threats to a certain future, new things, recently arrived.

The aspen lined valleys of the eastern Rockies, where he lived, were changing their face as the Arapaho faced the advances of white civilization. Winning the games of youth, the fate of the tribe, or even his own life he had long understood to be fragile and temporary. But now it turned out, were the very trees and soil of the landscape were, too. Lame beaver learned from his mother, "Only the rocks live forever," meaning that everything changes and is impermanent. Suddenly that truth took an unexpected turn—even the things which had seemed permanent were changing.

Lame Beaver is a character, a hero I should think, in James Michener's novel, *Centennial*. It chronicles the events of this town in the Colorado flat lands, just east of the Rockies; it chronicles the events of this little piece of geography from prehistory to the three quarter point of the twentieth century, in the grand sweep for which Michener is so well known. Lame Beaver's time is a watershed in this drama. His is the time of that the great expansion westward of the nineteenth century. Lame Beaver steps out of the pages of his time of tumult to bring us an ancient truth about change, about impermanence, about the fragile and difficult nature of existence. It is a painful lament that Lame Beaver was taught: "Only the rocks live forever."

Another character, from another time, also steps out of his story to say much the same thing. In this morning's scripture lesson, the lord God speaks out from the heavenly council to the prophet Isaiah with an absurd set of instructions. The setting is Babylon. The people Israel

has been in exile for a long time. Nebuchadnezzar's armies had long ago swept over Jerusalem like so many locusts over a futureless stand of wheat. The temple, once the proud edifice of David's dream and Solomon's empire and the center of Jewish worship, lay in ruins, a pile of looted rubble, bearing little likeness to its former grandeur of columns and mosaics and gold. And long ago, too, the people had been removed from their homes and their communities, herded across the desert like livestock, held hostage in an unfamiliar land, and forced to live in an unfamiliar culture, as T.S. Eliot puts it, with alien gods.

To the prophet, in this setting of gloom, came painful absurdity. God said to Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended." The prophet, in the midst of exile and alienation hears the unlikely promise of return to home and comfort.

And the prophet, crushed in exile, reports to us his defiant response. Isaiah says: 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 God blows upon it. Surely the people is grass."

God tells the prophet to speak a word of hope to the people. But the prophet looks out at the situation in which he and the people live, and he responds: Surely the people is grass, withered and faded." Isaiah responds the way he sees it. He says, "The people is withered like grass. There is no comfort here to preach."

Were Isaiah here today, he might find the withering grass familiar. He would notice that from Boston to Ferguson the stain of racial history and prejudice belies our mantra that all people are created equal. He would notice the poor for whom food, healthcare, housing and education are at best minimal. He would see a world politic that no sooner glimpses the prospect of peace than finds itself on the precipice of war again. He would even look into your heart or into mine and see the private pains and disappointments and worries that reside there. And he might shout out to God, "Show me that you are going to fix these things, and then, then, I will tell of comfort, comfort for the people."

Oddly, God has the divine council reply in apparent agreement, "The grass does wither; the flower does fade." But then God has the council undermine the agreement altogether. The council says, "The grass does wither; the flower does fade. But the word of god will stand forever." Like the endurance of lame beaver's rocks, when everything else is falling apart, is there not cold comfort to learn that God will stand forever? The rocks live forever. God endures forever. But what of the people who whither like grass?

\*\*\* Like Isaiah's, Lame Beaver's words have the sound of lament. They have a huge measure of sadness in them, to be sure. But for Lame Beaver, it turns out there was much more in those words than sadness. We miss something if we hear Lame Beaver's words only as hopeless lament.

For Lame Beaver, the saying also meant that amidst all the vagaries of life, something stood firm. At first, something stood firm through the ordinary things--through the passing of generations of the Arapaho people, through the vagaries of the hunt, and through the changing fortunes of the tribe. Later, something still stood firm, even as the beaver fell to the trappers, even as the golden aspen-lined valleys became ugly scars at the hands of those seeking a different kind of gold. As Lame Beaver looked up into the crumbling valleys, as he watched the land and the way of life of his people cross a threshold, cross a threshold to a place from which

there would be and could be no return, he found enormous sadness. But there was a measure of comfort for him in the fact that at least the rocks live forever.

And his was not a facile comfort born of some fatalism, born of throwing his hands in the air; though I am sure there were many times he did want to throw his hands in the air. Nor was Lame Beaver's comfort the beaten acceptance of defeat. Lame Beaver's comfort came as he faced and then acknowledged his limits, as he turned over control of things which he could not control. And paradoxically, this letting go gave Lame Beaver the freedom to act and to hope. Rather than being overcome by the immensity of what was happening around him, he found the freedom to stand up for what he loved and valued. Fighting a losing battle, the endurance of the rocks gave Lame Beaver confidence that despite all appearances not everything was fleeting and ephemeral.

Isaiah came to see something similar in God's promise. God said, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever." The people were promised the everlasting presence of God. It would be manifest sometimes as the arm of power, but more often as a shepherd, who gathers his lambs, holds them close to his bosom, who gently leads those who are with young. The people were freed to hope for and work for a future, perhaps even a future back in Jerusalem. But finally, their greatest freedom and comfort had to come from knowing that no matter how things turned out, their God was with them, and something good would outlast their hardships.

We can admit, we must say "Surely the people is grass." But we can also say that nevertheless, like the rocks, our God will stand, not only stand, but stand with us and beside us and within us forever. For Lame Beaver the rocks, which lived forever, were a part of him, and so, he too lived forever.

In Advent that expression of faith takes the form of longing for God among us, Emmanuel, a longing for God who suffers beside us and knows our heartbreak, a longing for God who cares for us as tenderly as a shepherd cares for his sheep who are with young and God who ultimately is one of us.

In Advent we begin to hear the words. First they come as whispers. But soon they are recognizable. We hear, "Comfort, comfort my people." They tell us not of an easy way. They tell us not that all our problems or those of our world will disappear. They tell us not of quick fixes. But they do not tell us of doom, either. The words tell us of a God standing beside us and within us, enduring like the rocks that lame beaver knew.

In these words and in this presence we find the courage and the strength to endure as well, to work for what is right, even in the face of lost causes, to find hope even where things seem to be hopeless. For finally, to know that God endures is to know that we do, too, that the withering and the fading are not the whole of the story. The withering and the fading are but the beginning of the story.

The paradox of our faith is that surely the people is grass, but also, in the end, the people, you and me, in the end, surely the people is rock, too. And in that, in that there is comfort, comfort my people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.