

There are many stories in the news that can be unsettling, and which should disturb us. So, it may or may not be the correct thing to do to joke about the troubles we are facing, but one TV preacher begins his sermons with humor, and a couple of jokes might be helpful as we meet such problems as the financial crisis.

Something like, “You know I wrote a check for \$5 the other day. The check was good, but the bank bounced!” “I heard that some congressmen and senators are upset over parts of the bailout bill. They voted for it, but now wish they hadn’t- it seems that all along they thought they were giving themselves a pay raise!”

“Doesn’t the bailout contain something like \$40 billion for Citigroup? I think that’s a good thing, don’t you- I mean, who doesn’t feel sorry for the credit card companies!” (Thanks to David Letterman and Jay Leno.)

Now the other side of the news. There was this story in the New York Times last week, about a woman who had rented a house in a very nice area, finally able to get herself out of a bad neighborhood and enroll her two daughters into a better school, only to be served eviction papers after the bank had foreclosed on her landlords who had merely pocketed her \$1900 a month rent checks. The

woman lost her savings, which had gone into her deposit, and now has no place to go and no money left to get there.

So many people are being displaced, losing everything: losing their homes in the mortgage crisis, losing their businesses in the credit crisis, losing their jobs because employers aren't hiring. Of course, that is in addition to the normal miseries that befall us; have you been reading about the record floodwaters drowning Fargo, ND, sending thousands from their homes. And think of the millions of Afghans and Iraqis displaced by the wars there; and those refugees all across Africa, where tribe rises up against tribe, Arabic Africans fight Black Africans, and militias and governments kill innocent villagers. People all around the globe who have lost everything.

I know I am not telling you anything you don't already know, that you haven't seen on TV, or noticed to a lesser degree perhaps, in our own community. But the words of our passage are appropriate to the sense of disruption and loss and fear, because they were written as a message of hope to a people after their nation had been overrun, the capital city besieged and destroyed, its government disbanded, and the temple- its most important building, and the emotional heart of the nation- torn down. Here for the nation of Israel was total destruction, and the

loss of national and personal identity. The people were defeated, homeless, unsure even who they were. They had taken their name from their great ancestor, Israel, who was given that name as a promise from God, and yet it seemed this God had forgotten or forsaken them. The people had been ruled by one royal house for over 400 years, God had sworn that the sons of King David would reign over Israel forever, yet they had seen their king taken captive and led away to Babylon. It must have seemed that their God, the God of promise and protection, had finally been defeated. If we put ourselves in the shoes of the hurting and desperate people of our country and around the world, maybe we can understand some of what those dispossessed citizens of 6th century B.C. Jerusalem must have felt.

But chapter 40 of this book of Isaiah begins a new section of hopefulness, written to people in such a sad situation, and offers an explanation for their great suffering and self-doubt. Maybe if we look closely, we can find meaning and encouragement even amidst the troubles that beset us and the people around us today. Chapter 40 begins with these words, “Comfort, comfort my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem, for her time of servitude is over,” and ends with our passage, these words that display such confidence in the power and compassion of God.

I think we could say that suffering is a teacher, and the first thing we must learn in our suffering is the size of God. Is God merely the God of my little group, a God of like thinkers, the God, merely, of my church, or my nation, or my race? That is what hate-mongers and terrorists believe. Isaiah shows us God who is the God of the world, the God who has held the oceans in his hands, measured the infinite skies by the length of his fingers (40:12). And our passage says that God created all the stars, keeps them in their proper place in the heavens, and knows them by name, all 10 sestillion of them, or more. That's big. That is a lot of creativity and power and knowledge. There is no way God doesn't know where we are. God has never misplaced us, regardless what some may have said in Isaiah's time, "My way is his from the Lord," verse 27; regardless how we may feel sometimes. He keeps track of us even if he seems far away or uncaring. God's power and strength are close at hand, waiting for our faith to mature to the place where we can see him as he is. That is the place we come to know ourselves as well, and realize that we can no longer stand by our own strength; that place is where God gives his power so that we might walk with him, and run and not give up; where he even gives us wings to fly.

What encouraging words are in this scripture, and what comfort may come to us even through suffering. For the nation of Israel, they discovered this place through the anguish of captivity and exile in Babylonia. For us, we too may have suffered enough that all “shallowness has been burnt away,” as one author has put it; our losses and hurts may bring us to the place where only God is. But also for us, we can see this place as a bare hill outside Jerusalem, where God made war against all the suffering and pride and evil and selfishness in the world, and in the dark midday, they were slain. And all that was left was God. That is the place we must go to meet God. And when we meet him there, we will understand him, and we shall mount up with wings like eagles, for the strength he gives to us; we shall walk in his ways and not falter; we shall run to tell the good news of the God who meets us in our deepest despair and never lets us fall away.

If you’ll let me read from Henri Nouwen once more, he has written this about reaching that place. He calls it the “place of poverty.”

Every time we think we have touched a place of poverty, we will discover greater poverty beyond that place. Beyond physical poverty there is mental poverty, beyond mental poverty there is spiritual poverty, and beyond that there is nothing, nothing but the naked trust that God is mercy. It is not a way we can walk alone. Only with Jesus can we go to the place where there is nothing but mercy. It is the place from which Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It is also the place from which Jesus was raised to new life. The way of Jesus can be walked only with Jesus. If I want to do it alone, it becomes a form of (false and prideful heroism). Only Jesus, the Son of God, can walk to that place of total surrender and mercy.

Let us go toward that place now, and show ourselves to God at the Lord's Table.

Sometimes at church I feel like that joke that goes, "Everyone talks about the weather, but no one ever does anything about it." Much of the time we talk about the problems of the world, but we don't do anything about them. We say that God is great, God is just, God is kind, God is love. But the problems of the world keep crashing down, and the failures of people put them on the edge of self-destruction, and we just say, "God loves you."

Well let me say, how proud I am to know you, to be connected to you. Just this past week we have received letters from our area minister thanking us for our contributions to his office and from Disciples' Home Missions to recognize First Christian for the donations we have sent for the work they do. Mike Bergman was here just a month ago to share the good things happening at Helping Hands, and to thank us for our part in that ministry; Sam Henderson was here two Sundays back

to make a presentation on behalf of the Gideon's, and collected our offerings- what he told me later was a large amount for such a small congregation. I am glad to brag on you, that you do not simply say in the face of hurt and trouble, "God loves you," but you go out to battle against the evil. There are, of course, so many other causes and drives that you participate in. And in doing these, you make this church become the prophet Isaiah's final word, a witness; the ultimate goal of God-believers, even as God works in the midst of their struggles. God's purpose works out this way: that his people come to a knowledge of the true God in the pains and losses of life, until we come to the place where God alone remains, where we see that God fills the universe, and where we see that God is close at hand, to fill our hearts. And we *witness* to this true God, no longer an idol of our own pride and selfish longing. Over and over Isaiah has God saying these words, "Do not be afraid, you are my witnesses: There is no God besides me" (44:8); "'I am the Lord, besides me there is no savior, and you are my witnesses,' says the Lord. 'I am God, and no other can take you from my hand'" (43:11,12).

This we can proclaim, because we have learned that this very great God has a very big heart. And it is opened wide to give comfort and mercy to all who hurt.

Let us continue to open our hearts to anyone we can help, to all those who need the joy and hope, and the enormity, of God's love.