

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: A Shepherd Brings Me Home

Pastor Sergio Chavez

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Scripture: Isaiah 40:6-11

⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall,

but the word of our God endures forever." ⁹ You who bring good news to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,^[a]

lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;

say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young.

Transcript:

So our scripture today reads as this, "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 on it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.'" And it goes on. It says, "Go on up to a high mountain. O Zion, herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, herald of good news, 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.'"

And then finally, in 11, it says, "He will tend 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." Isaiah 40:6-11. Bow your heads with me. Father in heaven, thank you so much for your word. Thank you for your scripture. Thank you for your promises, Lord. We come here today as an offering to you, Lord, in worship, that we want to connect with you. We want to build our faith with you, build each other up, Lord. We want to learn from your word, Lord. We want to be guided and strengthened by you, Lord. So we thank you so much for this opportunity to worship today. In your beautiful and your glorious name, amen.

For those who don't know me, my name is Sergio Chavez. I am the director of worship communities here. And outside of this church, I'm also a lay pastor outside, and I'm always just honored and blessed to be able to worship with you guys today. So thanks for joining us this morning.

So growing up in the '80s, from specifically a Mexicano family, you weren't given a lot of choices. You kind of had to do what you were told and kind of go where your parents told you to go. So wherever my parents went, I went. If they were going to the store, I was going to store. If they were going to church, I was going to the church. And if for some reason I couldn't go with them, then I was to stay with trusted family only. No babysitters, no nannies, no daycares, no preschools. And I say trusted family only because, just like my familia and I'm pretty sure some of yours, we were somewhat dysfunctional as well.

So some of my tios, they couldn't even take care of themselves, let alone take care of any of us kids. So it was trusted family only. And growing up in this environment, there was a few reasons why we were only left with family. One, as many of you know, childcare can be very expensive. And since we were poor immigrants, that kind of was off the table. But the second reason is a more important reason, is that it was a cultural thing, that in our culture, that your family were the ones who were to take care of you. And as well, it had to be with trusted family.

See, I believe that my mom has quite a bit of PTSD. Because in Mexico, the child infancy mortality rate is a lot higher. And my mom, a few of her kids have died. And so

she always made sure we were cared for and that we were safe. We were too important to her to just leave with anyone. So we were with family.

So this experience taught me a few things as I grew up in the '80s with all this. And that was one, I always felt safe because I was with someone that I trusted. Again, if my parents trusted them, then I could trust them. So I was always in good hands.

Second, I couldn't get out of line too much. So in our culture, you have to respect your elders. And everyone knew that anyone in the family who was older than us could discipline us. So if I was to act a fool, I could get the chancla. You had to keep in line with whoever was taking care of you, and it was just known.

And I tested those boundaries quite often. I didn't do really bad things, but I was the kind of kid who thought, "I wonder if a garbage bag would work as a parachute. Let me try it out by jumping off the second story of our house." I wish they would have taught us physics when I was six years old. But unfortunately, I learned later it doesn't work. I was that kind of kid. So I was testing everybody's patience out.

And then the last thing is I got to observe what a community of believers act like. I was very fortunate that my family was very involved in the church, and the church was very kind to us and cared for us. And we were a very interdependent culture, so we cared for one another one. So when new immigrants came, we would make sure they were okay. We'd get them food or clothes or whatever they needed. We were all very interdependent, and that's what I learned to be, what it was like to be part of a church family.

And so whether my family knew it or not, whether they were aware of it or not, they were shaping my worldview. They were teaching me. In a word, they were shepherding me. They were keeping me safe. They were disciplining me, and they were teaching me what it was like to be part of a flock. And that's where I find home. That's comfort for me.

And I am so blessed now, being here, the director of worship communities, that I get to see the same kind of activity with some of our worship communities here, like New Hope Revival, an East African church. They do the same things. When new refugees come, they make sure they have food and clothes or furniture or housing or whatever. And it's very familiar to me.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, which is peace. And I always find peace myself in my family because I realize that I was blessed to have a family that followed God. And we are currently, here at Belle Pres talking about finding home and how home is in Jesus. And that is where we find our comfort, our hope, our strength, and our rest.

And we're looking at the book of Isaiah specifically, the chapter 40. Isaiah is one of the book of the prophets, which is rich in, well, you guessed it, prophecy. And for those

who might not know what prophecy is, to prophesy means to tell the truth, but it also means to tell the truth maybe that's going to happen. To prophesy, that's coming in the future.

And last week, Dr. Dudley quickly summarized how badly the Israelites were behaving and how God was trying to get them to get their act together, but they just wouldn't listen. And so Isaiah prophesied in a vision their impending doom and exile. It's a very cheery opening, the book of Isaiah. It's like on of those movies where you start off, and the hero dies in the first scene. And you're like, "Great. Now I've got to sit through two hours of shenanigans finding out why Biscuits died." It's kind of that kind of opening.

But then Isaiah also prophesies beyond the exile and how they will return to their home. And that is where we're picking up in Isaiah 40:6-11. And as we read, you heard it starts off with this cry, letting us know how fragile life is. It says stuff like, "All flesh is grass. The beauty is like a flower in the field, but the grass withers, and the flower fades. And when the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely the people are grass." But it ends in Isaiah chapter 40 verse eight. It says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

So right off the bat, we get this kind of weird, hopeful opening. And it's very odd that Isaiah refers to people as grass. I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm more [Spanish 00:07:33] myself, but whatever. I didn't write the Bible. And for those of you who are wondering what [Spanish 00:07:38] is, you can just inform people in the comment section. But careful, that chancla culture might get you. Careful with the chancla.

So life is fragile. That's what Isaiah is pointing out and I think some of us may be feeling a little bit of that, dealing with the Rona. It didn't take long to turn our world upside down. But even in acknowledging that life is fragile, Isaiah reminds the people that God's word stands forever. His promise stands forever. His covenant that he will deliver his people, that will stand forever.

So today, I want to be frank with you, even though I'm Sergio to everyone else. I guess apparently in American culture, if you want to be a little more honest than normal, you have to be frank. But I would also think that'd be a lot of pressure if your name was Frank because then you really could never tell a lie. But either way, that's just American culture. We're just going to go with it.

But I struggled quite a bit with today's message. Because of my rough-around-the-edges background. I have a hard time offering flowery words of comfort. My Christian, immigrant, inner city, poor, interdependent background that introduced me to death and pain and domestic violence and racism and despair due to our powerless position in society because we're always seen as a second class citizen at a very early age. Well, it taught me very early on that life isn't fair and that life is fragile. So don't take it for granted.

I was also taught, thankfully, to have faith in God, that God is our only hope, and that there is no Plan B. And what I mean by no Plan B, not this kind of foolish like, "Jesus take the wheel," and "Jesus will protect me," and just act a fool. No, no, no. What that means, that every hill we climb, every valley we go into, everything that we face, we turn to God first. We turn to God for strength, for hope, for guidance. Because in those things, in trusting God, he might lead us to certain things. He might lead us to the doctor that we need to talk to or that person we need to talk to or the school where we may need to go. We start and we end with God. That's what Plan B means.

And today, I want to be faithful to scripture and relay the message that Isaiah had for God's people because it's kind of a tough one though. For 39 chapters, he just talks about how they are misbehaving. And so when I read Isaiah 40:6-8, I can't help but think of how some of us, sometimes us as believers, we put too much faith in worldly things instead of the spiritual. We put our hope in people and get distracted that it is God that stands forever.

We see this especially in famous or charismatic leaders of churches that fall from grace, and then all of a sudden that church can't recover. Those people can't recover. Well, it's because they forgot that God is the head of the church, not a person. A good leader should lead you to trust and anchor your faith in God, not them. And I'm happy to say here at Belle Pres, you have such great leaders who lead you to rely on God. Praise the Lord.

And so I don't think there's any better way to say it than in Isaiah 40, verse 8, "But the word of the Lord stands forever." That means that we always have a home in God's promise, in scripture, God's promise that he will deliver his people. Your home is here. So I have a tough reflective question for you today. And that would be, well, how often are you coming home? Are you only coming home when you're in despair, or are you coming home often so that you don't have to be as much in despair knowing that God keeps his promises?

Then Isaiah continues with the prophecy that one day they will overcome the exile and be restored and then to be heralds of good news, to proclaim that God is able. We read at the end of Isaiah 40:9-10, it says, "Herald of good news lifted up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God. Behold the Lord God comes with might. And his arms rule for him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him.'" I can barely say that word, recompense, recompense, whatever. You guys get it.

What Isaiah is saying here that the people of God will survive complete destruction and exile in the future. He is writing this beforehand. So he is saying, "One day you will overcome the consequences of your own sin, and you will come out of it because God will keep his promises. And when that happens, when you basically are coming back from the dead, you will be a witness and a testimony that God is able. And to remember at that time to tell others to strengthen and to encourage them."

Listen, I know the Rona is tough for some of us, but some of you out there, you have been delivered from extreme loss, from health issues, from poverty, from abuse, from financial ruin. And others of you, maybe you've just survived these things, but in that loss, you've strengthened your faith. We need your testimony. We need you to remind us where we get our strength from, to remind us that God is able, to trust in God. That's where we find our strength. We need someone to remind us that this too, COVID-19, the Rona, it too shall pass.

This is not the end. It doesn't mean we won't go unscathed. Some of us have been fortunate that we haven't suffered any problems, but that hasn't been the truth for everybody. There's already been people who have died. There's people now who are suffering. But God's promise will be true. We will overcome.

Now, the people of God, they were a rebellious bunch. There are some 30-odd chapters of how rebellious they were. And we really can't judge them too much because we're not much different ourselves. When we're lost and we need help, when we've tried everything else, every other possibility that we have, and then we're finally broken and we want to then, at that point, we have nothing else but to turn to God, then we want God to be a comforting God. We want him to be a source of strength, someone to carry us. Even though we may have just completely ignored the fact of during our rebellion, we blamed God for a lot of things or we felt that he wasn't anything but that, we made God out to be not comforting and not a source of strength.

And if there's anything that you remember of what I say today, I want you to memorize this verse, Isaiah, chapter 40, verse 11. "He," God, "will tend 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." What Isaiah is saying is that you will have to pay for your sins, people of God, and you will go into exile. But when God delivers you and when you come back to him, he will shepherd you. He will gather you up in his arms. He will carry you. He will even lead those who have young, those who have a heavier burden than others, and lead them gently. Everything that we wish God to be, a source of comfort, a source of strength, someone to carry us, is here in plain Hebrew. But we have to come back home to read it.

I recently watched a documentary of these Wakhi shepherds in the hills of Afghanistan. It's in a very remote part of Afghanistan, far away from civilization, nothing out there but hills and country. And it's a very, very hard life to tend these sheep. I mean, the sheep is their livelihood, so keeping them alive is in their best interest. Without these flocks, they would most likely starve to death. That's their only source of income and some source of their food, not eating the sheep, but collecting milk from the sheep.

I had someone ask the question, "Can you milk a sheep?" I'm like, "Yeah, you can." There's sheep milk out there, sheep cheese out there. So yes, you get milk from sheep.

But these shepherds, they risk their lives for their flock. They protect them from wolves, from bears, from snow leopards. They do everything to protect these flocks. And as a people, it almost seems that they protect them more than themselves. The people, the Wakhi people, seem to be more at risk than the sheep due to the rough and terrible terrain.

And the woman that hosted this documentary, she had a sheep farm herself. And so she had some understanding of what it was to care for sheep. And when she saw this terrain, the grass was brown. It was short and stubby and coarse, and the hills were harsh, and it was rocky. But she noticed that these lambs, they were strong and healthy, not what she was expecting, all because of these Wakhi shepherds. They have been shepherds for centuries. They know how to care for their flocks.

And it was somewhat funny that the comfortable life that she provided for her sheep hurt them sometimes more than it helped them. Her sheep would suffer foot rot due to the soft green pastures that her sheep lived in because of heavy rains. Their comfortable lives put them more in danger than these mountain sheep who were led through these rough terrains by these shepherds.

And when she went out to herd the flock of sheep with one of these shepherds, because she wanted to see what his like, she goes on to say, while she was walking through this brown, rocky, rough pasture. And she says, I quote, "This isn't lush green Welsh pasture like my sheep are used to. Yet these animals look like they're in peak condition. They're fat. They look healthy, and something that I'm incredibly envious of, that not one of them is limping."

Now, the documentary didn't follow her back to her farm. So I am unaware if she changed her ways back home. But I think what seemed to be most revealing to her is the idea that her sheep, even though with all the creature comforts that they had, didn't equal the best quality of life. Here were these sheep in these really rough terrains, but with good shepherds, they were thriving.

Now, it is December. And traditionally, we look at the birth of Jesus in the Middle East and traveling from Middle East to Africa and back and the whole nativity story. And we focus on this light in the darkness of this child born, Jesus. And we can see here in Isaiah these parallels to the nativity story. And the first thing we see is that life is fragile, but God keeps his promises. It was very difficult for Mary and Joseph to, how would you say this, to give birth to Jesus, to have to travel where they were at, where they were in, the dwellings wasn't the best place. It was really hard. Life was fragile. But God kept his promises. He promised a Messiah, and a Messiah was born.

Second, there was heralds of good news. Angels appeared, and it just so happens to be that some of these angels, they appeared to none but other than shepherds. Is that an English word, none but other? Is that right? Oh my goodness, no butter. None other but.

None other but? That sounds worse than none other than shepherds. I'm always making up stuff. You guys can make a dictionary of Sergio sayings, and we will sell it on Amazon for three cents, and it will go to a good charity. But these angels appeared to none other than some shepherds.

And then the third thing is that God is described as a shepherd in Isaiah, and one day Jesus will describe himself as a shepherd, this light in the darkness. Later on, we read in John 10:11, this is Jesus speaking, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And that's exactly what Jesus ended up doing. He was born as a light in the darkness, but later on, he would lay down his life, and his blood would pay for our sins to offer us salvation. He is the good shepherd.

So I have another tough question for you to reflect on today. Have you been following other shepherds? If you're feeling lost at the moment, I don't think the Rona did all of that because a shepherd will lead you even through trouble, even through rough terrains. We read this in the Bible in a very, very famous passage of Psalms 23 and specifically Psalms 23:4. And it reads like this, "Yea, though, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou," God, "art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." So even when we walk in the shadow of the valley of death, God is leading us.

I think some of the blessings of the Rona have really been to our spiritual lives. I know it's a terrible disease, and I know there's a lot of things to not be happy about, but there has been some blessings. And one of those is that I think it has exposed for us as believers our idols other than God and how they're not really helping us out right now. The things that we have worshiped in place of God just aren't cutting it.

I think one of the second blessings it has done is I think it's also exposing that we may have been following other shepherds. To have idols is to worship something. To have a shepherd is to have someone else lead you. And those shepherds aren't cutting it either. So on this Advent Sunday, according to scripture here in Isaiah, we can find peace because we are promised that there is a good shepherd, one who risked everything to lead us, comfort us, strengthen us and give us rest. If we are willing to stay with the flock, we will always find a home with him.

Now, I know that I was very blessed to have a family around me, one who was strong in faith, and I know not everyone had that and for a bunch of different reasons. So one advice I want to give to you is Belle Pres, this church, is a family. You are welcome here. Find your place here. One of the things that I heard in the all-in groups was that it was hard to connect in this large church. Well, then the advice I'd give to you is start with one person. Maybe it's the usher. Maybe it's the person passing out bulletins. Maybe it's the person at the welcome table.

And for those of you, Belle Pres, that you have called this place family your entire life, keep an eye out for those who may need to be part of a family. Reach out to them. Say hello to them. Introduce them to others. You will always have a family among God's people. Bow your heads with me.

Father in heaven, I want to thank you so much for your word. I want to thank you so much for your words from Isaiah. Although they are tough, Lord, they still bring us hope, and they strengthen us, God. We want to only rely on you, Lord, that you guide us, you strengthen us, you give us wisdom that we don't have in order to help one another and find peace with you. In your beautiful and your glorious name, together we all said, amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. In Isaiah 40:6-8, the comparison of people and God is what? Why do you think this comparison even needs to be made?
2. In Isaiah 40:9-10, what are the people to proclaim? Why would this be important after the exile?
3. In Isaiah 40:11 what characteristics are revealed about God?
4. Of what we read in Isaiah 40:11, does this change our view of Psalm 23?