

I have an old friend who was ordained a priest, worked in a parish for a few years, left the priesthood, got the Vatican to release him from his priestly vows, fell in love, got married in the church, then was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, lost a lot of his physical abilities, got divorced, got his marriage annulled by the Catholic Church, met a woman on the internet, married her in a Catholic wedding, and this summer, after just a few years of a happy marriage, she died from complications of melanoma. Somehow he has managed to keep a good attitude, but I always think of his as a life of extraordinary adversity. He is still in his 40s.

I'm sure everyone here has had your share of sorrows – some even more than this. Our misfortunes in life can be devastating. Even so, it is hard to imagine the calamities that befell the people of Israel in the Old Testament. In today's first reading, Isaiah speaks to people who have been attacked by an enemy nation. Many noncombatants have been slaughtered. Others have been hauled off into captivity in another country. Foreigners drove them out and occupied their homes. This happened not just to one person or to one family, but to an entire people. And these people thought they were special. They were, after all, God's chosen people. God had chosen them, entered a covenant with them and promised to protect them for ever. But now they faced devastation. Whenever they asked, "How could God do this to us?" they came up with the same answer: "God could do this to us because of what we did to God. We are suffering because we have sinned."

It was to these people that Isaiah addressed this amazing prophecy. He says, "God comes to save you." Salvation will be comprehensive. The desert will spring into bloom. The disabled will get their abilities back, and those who are frightened will have nothing to fear. "Strengthen the hands that are feeble," Isaiah says, "make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, he comes with vindication." Not with new creation, prosperous businesses, fame or fortune – God is coming to take revenge on those who put Israel in this position. Israel gets to return home, but not until harm happens to enemies and homeland alike.

Even though we may not have suffered at this magnitude – the loss of family, home, city and nation to foreigners – our sufferings are real and they hurt. Whether they be physical, spiritual, political or psychological, Isaiah's message comes as good news to us: "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God. He comes to save you."

Israel had to let go of the homes that were destroyed and the lives that were lost, of the possessions that were stolen and the days that were wasted. But God had rescued them with something more – a covenant that endured forever and a dwelling place in the skies, a return to some semblance of what was normal and a Savior who would lead them further. When God comes to save us, he does it his way; it will involve loss, but the gain will be greater than whatever was before.