carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord” (39:6). Sure enough, Babylon invaded and carried the people into exile.

But this period of defeat and loss was not the end of the story. Isaiah dreamed the world better by sharing his vision of God’s heavenly words. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,” God said, “and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (40:2). God declared that the people of Israel had paid a great price for their sins of injustice and unfaithfulness. Their time of punishment was over, and nothing more would be required of them. When God forgives, the slate is wiped clean, for them and for us.

Then a voice cried out: “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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (vv. 3-5).

A great desert wilderness stood between Babylon and Jerusalem. This heavenly voice called for the creation of a highway for God, one in which the people could travel home. This “way” in the desert is God’s way, says Old Testament professor Christopher Seitz. “This way is the way of restoration, and it belongs to God.”

The way of restoration is the highway created for God’s people. Defeat is replaced by victory, sin substituted with forgiveness, and loss exchanged for restoration. Years later, Luke spoke of the word of God coming to John the Baptist in the wilderness: “He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”’” (Luke 3:3-4). A baptism of repentance. The forgiveness of sins. The way John outlines, is the way of God’s restoration. John, like Isaiah, dared to dream the world better.

So where do we need restoration today? The apostle Paul looked forward to the day when all creation “will be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21), and we know what he is talking about. We look around and see the polluting of the planet, the spread of disease, the divisiveness of racism, the poison of politics, and the brokenness of relationships. We look inside ourselves and see the decay of our morals and aspirations. Restoration is desperately needed! We need to hear the message of hope that Isaiah and Luke delivered with the words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

So many crooked things need to be straightened out, and we cannot do it alone. Isaiah knows that human power fades, like the grass that withers away, but he also knows that the word of God is rock-solid and eternal (40:6-8). When we open ourselves to the power of God’s word, when we let God’s word touch us and transform us, we find ourselves straightened out and restored.

On the first day of creation, God made the powerful, life-giving light using only the words, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3). God’s words brought order out of chaos. God continued to speak through the words of prophets like Isaiah, through messengers such as John the Baptist, and most powerfully through the teachings of Jesus, the Word of God in human form (John 1:14). Amid the chaos of modern crookedness and decay, we need these divine words more than ever.

In his “I Have a Dream” speech during the 1963 March on Washington, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (quoting the prophet Amos) said, “We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” The crowd responded with such emotion, says biographer Taylor Branch, that King could not bring himself to deliver the next line of his prepared speech. As people on the platform urged King on, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson called out as though she were in church, “Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.” Branch says that King began to preach, and his words “went beyond the limitations of language and culture.” His “Dream” message took him from Amos to Isaiah, and he ended with the words, “I have a dream that one day, every valley shall be exalted.”

Words create reality. The words of Isaiah dreamed the world better, and then Jesus Christ made those words real. Jesus is, for us, the Word of God made flesh, and we can be thankful that “the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8). Jesus forgives our sins, wipes our slates clean, straightens us out, and gives us hope for the future.

All we need do is receive him, believe in him, and walk with him. Jesus is the One about whom Isaiah spoke when he said, “lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (40:9).

Jesus is Isaiah’s dream come true, the one who fulfills the prophecy: “See, the Lord God comes with might.…He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep” (40:10-11). Jesus is the one who possesses God’s might and feeds his flock like a shepherd. He is the One who has the power to straighten us out, but also the grace that lovingly restores us.

When the birth of Jesus is celebrated this Christmas, remember the words of Isaiah: “Here is your God!” Jesus joins Isaiah in bringing you back from exile, wherever you may be wandering. Jesus does the work of restoration by forgiving you and giving you a new life. He makes the rough places smooth and the crooked ways straight. Isaiah dreams the world better and Jesus brings those dreams to life.

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**Dream the World Better**

Sunday, December 6, 2020 Isaiah 40:1-11

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Luke 3:1-6

What is your wildest dream? Do you dream of having lunch with superstar George Clooney at his Lake Como villa? Driving a Lamborghini autographed by the pope? Sitting for a photoshoot with Annie Leibovitz? Taking a road trip through the Pacific Northwest in a 2020 Corvette C8? Enjoying coffee with David Lynch and then being drawn by him? Winning and customizing a tiny home?

 If so, your dreams could come true! Omaze is a for-profit, online platform that raises money for local homeless shelters, planting trees in the Amazon rainforest, providing clean water to communities in Kenya and Haiti, and to the United Nations Children’s Fund. Omaze links worthy organizations with dreamy prizes like the Clooney lunch and the Pope-signed luxury car. Then it runs a sweepstakes that raises a lot of money for charity, while delivering a dream prize to a lucky winner. Even though Omaze takes a percentage of the sweepstakes donations, it still helped 350 charities raise $130 million in the last decade. Omaze’s motto: Dream the world better.

The prophet Isaiah wanted to dream the world better, but he had a different approach. Isaiah had a vision, a dream in which he saw the God speaking to a group of heavenly beings. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term” (Isaiah 40:1-2). Isaiah must have had one of those coveted positions in which you get paid to sleep. You know: A dream job.

Isaiah’s vision of divine comfort comes after 39 chapters of warnings to Israel. When Isaiah told the people to seek justice and put their faith in God, but they rebelled. As a result, Isaiah predicted that the treasures of the king “will be