

Sermon for December 7, 2014 – Advent 2

Isaiah 40:1-8 (NIV84)

Theme: **Our Comfort is Coming!**

1. *Hear God's intent (vv. 1, 2)*
2. *Prepare with repentance (vv. 3–5)*
3. *Believe his everlasting Word (vv. 6–8)*

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory 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 stands forever."

Imagine what it would feel like if God removed his protective hand from your life. Imagine losing: your home, your possessions, your spouse, your children and even your freedom all at once. And why? For one simple reason: You did not listen to the Lord's continuous call to repent! And now – the very things you treasured are gone and you are taken captive. If this were to happen to me, I could summarize how I would feel in one word: hopeless.

The situation I described was far from hypothetical for Judah. In the year 586 BC Jerusalem was conquered, the temple was destroyed, and all the Jews were exiled to Babylon. Why? Because of their continued refusal to repent of their idolatry. How did the Jews feel at this time? In a word: hopeless.

But the Lord did not want them to lose hope. No, He loved his lost people – just as he loves all his lost sheep today. He wanted them to return to him in repentance and faith. This is why even before he sent his judgment, he promised his people that he would restore them. The Lord gave them hope.

Let us consider the hope God promised, not only the Jews, but to all people who feel hopeless because they have come to realize both the magnitude of their sin and the punishment they deserve for it, under the theme: **Our Comfort is Coming!** 1) *Hear God's intent.* 2) *Prepare with repentance* 3) *Believe his everlasting Word*

Part One: Hear God's intent.

In the 39 chapters leading up to our sermon text, Isaiah issues a dire warning for Judah: because of the people's continued idolatry, the LORD would allow the armies of Babylon to both conquer and exile them. If it were not for the Lord's abiding love, they would be left without hope.

But, as the Scriptures say, the LORD does not take pleasure in the death of anyone. He wants all to repent and live!ⁱ And this is exactly why He told Isaiah to write:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

What a most wonderful promise: the LORD emphatically wishes to comfort his wayward people. Yes, they were unfaithful to him – and for this reason they needed to be disciplined. But look: the LORD has not completely forsaken them. He is not ashamed to call them his people. He is not ashamed to be called their God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ – our sins have also separated us from God. We were unfaithful, but the LORD – in his mercy – did not let us die apart from him. No, He sent out heralds to proclaim comfort. He wants us back. No matter what we have done in our past, the LORD willingly calls believers his people. He gives us the privilege of calling him our God. And why? The next verse tells us:

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins

What wonderful news for the Jews living in exile: it's all over. They could go back home! And why? Because their sin had been paid for. By whom? Not by themselves – that's for sure. Millions of years in hell could not even begin to repay God for their rebellion against him. No – someone else paid for their sin, someone whom the rest of Isaiah's book will describe as the Lord's special servant: the Christ who would suffer and die for the sins of the world! And what would the result of Christ's sacrifice be for their sins?

God promised this wonderful exchange, in place of penalty for sin they would be given a double measure of the opposite, namely grace and blessing. Instead of being treated like the rebels they were, they would receive an inheritance from God that would normally be reserved for a crown prince!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: realize that the promises spoken here to the Jews also apply to us and all others who look to the LORD in faith and are thereby considered his people. The Christ who would pay for the sins of the Jews would also pay for the sins of the entire world. Since we are forgiven, the Lord promises to give us double for all our sins: eternal life instead of eternal death, a place of honor instead of disgrace, and the right to be God's dearly loved children in heaven instead of his hated enemies in hell.

These are God's intentions for us. This is the comfort our Christ won for us at his first coming, and this comfort is what the Lord will perfectly deliver us to at his second.

Part Two: Prepare with repentance.

Our text continues:

A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.

Oh what wonderful news there is in this verse: God is neither sending a mere mortal nor an angel to rescue us from our exile. No, he himself - the almighty, holy King of the universe - is coming to rescue us sinners!

In ancient times it wasn't uncommon to build a nice road for a visiting King or special dignitary. What greater King is there than the LORD? And who would build the direct road across the impassable desert for the LORD to come and rescue his people? The Scripture tells us that it was John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus through his preaching of repentance, which is summarized in the next verse:

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

Could you imagine leveling a whole mountain or filling in an entire valley all by yourself? It would be impossible! And it is just as impossible for us to fill in the valleys sin has caused in our hearts and to knock down the mountains of self-righteous pride in order that the LORD may come to us. But that's really part of the point, isn't it? We are far too sinful, too deceitful, too corrupt and crooked to even begin building a road to God. He must build it to us.

And how does God get rid of all the things in our hearts that try to hinder his coming? Through the preaching of His Law which points out how damnable we actually are.

Addicts are told that the first step to recovery is admitting you have a serious problem and are not in control. This also is the first step in recovering from our sins. Spend time meditating on God's law and it becomes clear – we have a real problem and are not in control. We cannot stop sinning on our own. We need help. We need a Savior.

And once we come to that realization, the Lord comes to us with his sweet Gospel and reassures us that His Son is our Savior. Jesus did for us what we failed to do for him: he kept God's law perfectly for us and paid for our sins. And how do we receive this gift? Through faith in him.

Jesus once said: *"I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him."*ⁱⁱ Did you notice that last part of that verse? It didn't say that he (the person who speaks and believes) will throw the mountain into the sea, but that it will be done for him.

The same is true regarding building a road to God. We are unable to clear the obstacles that separate us from him, but LORD isn't. God's Word, his Law and Gospel, move us to confess our sins and cry out for forgiveness. And when this happens, the mountains of pride crumble, the valleys of sin are filled in, our crooked thoughts and desires are made straight, and the Lord comes into our heart.

This is all the Lord's work, operating through the message his humble heralds proclaim – just like John the Baptist did in Judea before Jesus was revealed to His people. The Spirit working through his call to repent prepared the people to receive their God, as Isaiah promised:

And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Jesus is the LORD's true glory – first revealed to man when the angels told the shepherds of his birth, and who continues being revealed to man through the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel. How do we know this to be true? Because the disciples who followed Jesus wrote: *We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*ⁱⁱⁱ

On the last day all mankind – both living and dead – will see Christ Jesus coming in the clouds in judgment to rescue his believers from this earth. It will be both a day of mourning and joy: mourning for those who refused to repent and turn to Jesus in faith. Joy for those, however, whom the Spirit led to heed God's call to repent, and trusted God's promise to save.

Part Three: Believe his everlasting Word

And this is why it is important that God's Word gets out. What word is that? The word that isn't afraid to speak the truth about man and our need for salvation, the word that John the Baptist proclaimed, as our text says:

*A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the
flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them.*

God commanded his chosen servants – like John the Baptist – to preach. What should they preach? The truth about mankind: that all their accomplishments, deeds, and things they esteem are all like the grass and wildflowers of the desert. As pretty as they look, they are all withered and dried up in an instant. Many great nations have fallen overnight because the Lord determined them to fall.

Judah knew this truth first hand. They put their trust in themselves – thinking that they would never fall, but the Lord proved:

*Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands
forever."*

No matter how unlikely it may have seemed, the Lord kept his word and punished Judah for their sin. Their glory faded away. And no matter how impossible their restoration seemed to be, the Lord kept his promise regarding that as well. He brought them back from their captivity in Babylon. Even more importantly, He kept his promise to Adam and Eve, and rescued mankind from their slavery to sin. Because of this, we can be sure that he will also keep his promise regarding the future. He will come again to deliver all who look to him in repentance and faith from their exile on this evil earth.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we celebrate Jesus' first coming, let us also joyfully look forward to the future and remember that **our comfort is coming again!** *Remember God's intent for you* (namely, to graciously save you from your sin), *prepare for his salvation through repentance, and trust his everlasting promise.* Then you will be prepared to receive your God who came on the first Christmas to be our Savior, continues to come through Word and Sacrament to keep us trusting in his salvation, and will come at the end of time so that we might live with him forever. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. Ezekiel 18:23,30-32

ⁱⁱ Mark 11:23, NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ John 1:14, NIV84