

A Word of Comfort

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Is. 40:1        Comfort, O comfort my people,  
                      says your God.

2        Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
                      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.

Is. 40:3        A voice cries out:  
                      "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
                      make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4        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.

5        Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
                      and all people shall see it together,  
                      for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Is. 40:6        A voice says, "Cry out!"  
                      And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
                      All people are grass,  
                      their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7        The grass withers, the flower fades,  
                      when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
                      surely the people are grass.

8        The grass withers, the flower fades;  
                      but the word of our God will stand forever.

9        Get you up to a high mountain,  
                      O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
                      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!"

10       See, the Lord GOD comes with might,

and his arm rules for him;  
 his reward is with him,  
 and his recompense before him.  
11 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.

## A WORD OF COMFORT

Today's lesson is a word of comfort for a people who lived in exile.

For many long years God's people had lived in Babylon. Their children had begun to adopt the language and the ways of their oppressors. Many thought they would never return to the Promised Land again.

But, God had a surprise for his people. In a foreign land and a place that seemed to hold no hope, God told the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort, O Comfort my people."

In the language of poetry the prophet Isaiah does just that. Exile will not have the last word with God's people. God will have the last word.

## A WORD OF FORGIVENESS

This word of comfort begins with a word of forgiveness.

According to the prophets, Israel was in exile because she was being punished for her sins. Before the Exile the poor were terribly oppressed, and there was little justice in the land.

God warned the people over and over again. But, finally enough was enough. The temple was destroyed, and almost everyone except the poorest of the poor went into exile in a foreign land. The mood of this exiled people was captured well by the Psalmist (137:1), who wrote,

"By the rivers of Babylon—  
 there we sat down and there we wept  
 when we remembered Zion."

We might not know what it means to physically be in exile, but we do know what it feels like to be separated from God and from the ones we

love by sinful behavior. We still have a sin problem. Individually and as a society we experience daily the alienation that comes from injustice and moral failure.

We too are far from home. Like the prodigal son our sins have placed us in exile.

But, God told his exiled people, "You are no longer captive to your past. Your term of punishment has been served. You have already paid double for your sins." The image is of a prisoner who has completed his term and is now released from prison. Can you imagine the joy of that day?

And we who are (as the song puts it) "in lonely exile here" also receive the same word of comfort. We can confess our sins and go in a new direction. We don't have to stay in the same place. The sins of our past do not have to determine the direction of our future.

The word of comfort begins with a word of forgiveness. For us that word is this, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." Our sins have been born by the Lamb of God, and that means new life is possible.

### A WORD OF NEW LIFE

But, God does more than just forgiving the sins of his people. God also prepares a way for the people to come home.

A great desert lay between the exiles and the Promised Land. God said, "I'm going to take down that barrier to your homecoming."

God's highway in the wilderness will rearrange the landscape. He will lop off the mountaintops and fill in the valleys. He will smooth out the rough places.

The desert was a tough place, but the prophet reminds God's people that it was in the desert that they learned to trust in God.

When we face what seem like insurmountable odds, when we face the desert of despair and destruction, then we learn to really trust God. The glory of God becomes apparent to all when captives are freed and come back home to the Promised Land.

God still makes a way when there seems to be no way. In the wilderness of your despair God is able to make a way back home. It might be hard to believe, but the way back home is based upon God's promise.

In verse 5 of our lesson for today we read that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. And when God speaks things happen. Creation happens. The landscape is changed for the better. People are saved.

I can't say how the landscape will be rearranged in our day, but we do know how this promise rearranged the landscape in Jesus' day. Mark begins his story about the good news by quoting this passage.

That voice crying in the wilderness is none other than John the Baptist, a dead ringer for the prophets of old who spoke a word of comfort to exiled people.

A person being examined for membership in Presbytery made a good point. He referred to all those portraits of John the Baptist from the middle ages. And he noted that in those portraits John is always pointing. John is not pointing at himself. John is not pointing at the crowd.

No, John is always pointing to Jesus. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one who sets us free.

We can't forgive sins. We can't set people free. But, we can point to the one who can. He is the one who comes. He is the one whom we celebrate during this Advent season.

## THE ETERNAL WORD

So this passage comforts God's people with a word of forgiveness, a word of new life and third, a word that is eternal.

The prophet begins by asking us to contemplate the brevity of life. He is like the Psalmist who wrote, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." (90:12)

So, what does the prophet find when he counts the days? He finds that life is frightfully short. He expressed it this way, "We are like grass or

flowers. We may bloom for a while but time is very short. The grass withers. The flowers fade.”

In and of itself that message is rather discouraging. Where is the comfort in hearing the obvious, that life is short?

But, the brevity of our life is set over against the eternal nature of God’s word. The Scripture tells us,

“The grass withers. The flowers fade. But, the word of our God will stand forever.”

Therein lies the comfort.

We trust not in the fading promise of human life. We trust in the eternal promises of Almighty God. God’s word is eternal. And in that eternal word we have hope not only for this life but also for the life to come. God’s word continues to provide comfort in new and exciting ways each and every day.

We see that truth played out in our lesson for today. God’s word was a word of comfort and promise to the exiles, and much later it was a word of comfort and promise in the time of Christ. Indeed it was one of the foundational prophecies concerning the Messiah.

And it is still a word of comfort and promise in our day as well.

When I think of this passage I think of its musical rendition in Handel’s Messiah. Many of us make it a point during advent to listen to that crystal clear tenor voice proclaim, “Comfort ye comfort ye my people.”

I think the eternal nature of this message is best sung.

Google “comfort ye” and listen to the many good examples of this piece on You Tube. Let the word of comfort and the promises of this passage wash over your heart and mind.

I can think of no better way to prepare for the one who comes.

God’s words and God’s promises are not bound by time. They are for us and our children and our children’s children.

And this means God's words are effective in accomplishing God's purposes. Isaiah would later say that God's word does not return to God empty. God's word always succeeds in the thing for which God sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

We have yet to see the final chapter when it comes to the promises of God. And that is why during Advent we once again wait for our Lord to come. We have a part to play in the eternal plans and promises of God. This causes us to approach each day with a sense of hope and anticipation.

And this eternal word causes us to proclaim the good news to others. Isaiah told his people to proclaim this word of comfort far and wide. Don't be afraid. Your God is here. (40:9)

### A WORD OF COMPASSION

Finally, this prophecy brings us comfort because God is revealed to be a God of compassion. When all is said and done, God is a shepherd and we are the sheep of God's pasture.

The mighty God, the God of creation chooses to gently lead His people.

We say in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that the Lord is my shepherd. This is the same message. I love the tender images in this last paragraph.

God feeds the flock. God gathers the lambs in his arms, and presses them close to his chest in love. God gently leads the mother sheep.

We might not know a lot about sheep and shepherds, but we do understand this promise of compassion. The King of kings and the Lord of lords is also a shepherd who gently leads his flock safely home.

One commentator noted that God's people did not deserve the mercy, the comfort that they received.

Jesus was right when he said that Jerusalem was the city that killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it. Jesus wanted to take Jerusalem under his wing, but she was not willing. (Matthew 23:7)

But, in this passage we learn that God is not finished with Jerusalem. God is still the good shepherd who seeks and saves the lost.

And God is not finished with us either. He loves us too much to leave us as we are.

The Lord is still our shepherd. He comes to us in our place of exile and brings us this word of comfort and joy.

The opening line of our lesson for today, "Comfort, O Comfort my people" is a double imperative.

God wanted the prophet to make it plain.

Bringing a word of comfort to God's people was not optional. It was mandatory. Bringing a word of comfort is the essence of what it means to be God's prophet, God's messenger.

In the word of comfort we are reminded that God is love.

## COMFORT FOOD

I read once about a man who felt like God couldn't forgive him. And because of that he didn't feel worthy to take communion.

For months he was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and shame. He said that he still went to church. He read the liturgy, sang the hymns and listened intently to the sermons. He was hoping for some word of hope, some answer that would change things.

But, he was disappointed. He wrote,

"Often I choked back the tears as I sat in silence while the rest of the congregation went forward. I feared going forward, scared that I would have some kind of emotional breakdown and create a terrible, emotional scene in front of the whole congregation.

Sometimes I just left the sanctuary before communion and sat in the car while my boys finished Sunday school.

The work of lowering the mountains of my pride and raising the valleys of my despair took weeks. Then one Sunday, I finally felt like I could take communion again.

As I listened to the Gospel lesson, which was the parable of the lost sheep, it just dawned on me that God was searching for me just like the shepherd looked for the one lost sheep.

I don't know why it dawned on me that Sunday. I don't know why 6 months of participating in liturgy and hearing good sermons didn't make it happen sooner. It just happened that Sunday, and I could go forward and receive communion again.

God wasn't any different that day; perhaps I had finally done the internal work of preparing the way."

Do you feel estranged from God and the ones you love? Do you feel an overwhelming sense of guilt?

The same God who called the Israelites home from exile is calling you home today. There is a voice crying in your wilderness.

It is not a voice of judgment and despair. It is a voice of comfort.

Today I seek to bring you a word of comfort. And what better way to find comfort than to eat comfort food. No, I'm not talking about eating at your favorite restaurant after the service.

I'm talking about the Lord's Table.

This meal is not about meatloaf and mashed potatoes but about the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Today the Lord invites you to eat at his table. This is not a meal for the righteous. This is meal for sinners who want to come home.

Remember the disciples who first took that meal? They took it we are told "on the same night" that Jesus was betrayed.

Judas was not the only one who betrayed Jesus. He was betrayed by all of those first disciples. Peter denied him. The others ran away.

But, even in the midst of betrayal, Jesus was laying the foundation for salvation. He gave them a meal in which he proclaimed, "This is my body which is broken for you. This is my blood which is shed for you."

In other words what those disciples could not do for themselves, Jesus did for them. He forgave them and made it possible for them to one day come back home.

What Jesus did for them, he does for us as well. We can repent. We can decide to go in a different direction. We can decide to leave the wilderness of our current life and experience the divine comfort.

But, in the final analysis, only the power of God can make that dream a reality.

Only God can prepare a road in the wilderness. Only God can save us from our guilt and sin. Only God in Christ can baptize us with the Spirit of new life.

Today I bring you good news.

God has done it. The hard work of salvation has already been completed. A road has been prepared in the wilderness.

In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. And Jesus has invited you to his home to eat this meal of grace.

Amen.