

“A Word of Comfort”

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Isaiah 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.

Isaiah 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.”

Isaiah 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.

SEEKING COMFORT

Where can we find comfort in a difficult time?
People seek comfort in a number of ways.
We talk about comfort food, say meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

People from my “neck of the woods” know all about Southern Comfort.

One of the reasons that some of us like Christmas is the season promises (in the words of the hymn, “God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman”) “tidings of comfort and joy”.

But, there are some situations so difficult that they defy comfort.

No amount of food and drink will help.
And when we see someone in that situation we want to help.

Almost every week someone asks me,

“How can I bring a word of comfort to someone who is struggling?
What can I say that will help them in their time of need?”

That’s a tricky question.

All of us are different.

What is comforting to one person might be unhelpful or even disturbing to another person.

Those who have been trained as Stephen Ministers are aware of this.
One of the books they read advises them not to sing songs to a heavy heart.

Sometimes in our effort to bring comfort we actually bring more pain.

The reason for that is we talk too much, and often the things we say are meant to bring ourselves comfort in a difficult situation instead of bringing comfort to the one who is struggling.

So, my advice is to listen more than you talk.
Tread lightly when dealing with a broken heart.
Our ability to bring a word of comfort is extremely limited by our own weakness.

COMFORT TO EXILES

On the other hand, in this passage we learn that the promises of the Lord can bring a word of comfort in even the most difficult of circumstances.

I can't imagine a more difficult circumstance than the Babylonian Captivity. God's people had been in Exile for a long time.

The Temple had been destroyed.
Leaders had either been killed or humiliated and taken into captivity.
Enemies gloated at their downfall.

Many had abandoned their faith.
They were learning to make the best of things in a foreign land.
Children were learning to speak the language of their captors instead of learning the language of their homeland.

I got some insight into what that may have been like a few years ago. A family from another country who attended our church had children who were born here.

As a result the children did not speak the language of their homeland. And when they finally met their grandmother, she was greatly distressed to learn that he couldn't communicate with her own grandchildren.

Those of us who are grandfathers or grandmothers can identify with her distress.
We see the future in our children and our grandchildren.

And if they speak a foreign language, if they have become comfortable in a place that is not home, we feel left out.

This must have been what it was like for God's people during the Babylonian Captivity.

They had not only lost their homeland.

It looked like they were losing their future as well.

Their own children were speaking the language of the enemy.

And yet the Lord tells his prophet to go to a people filled with despair and preach a word of hope.

"Comfort my people."

That was the prophet's task

... to bring a word of comfort.

COMFORT YE

Actually, this call to bring a word of comfort was not just the prophet's task. Some of you recognize these words as the opening of words of Handel's Messiah (and also the hymn that we will sing after this sermon).

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

And the "ye" or the old English way of saying "you" is plural.

In other words, it is not just the prophet who is called to preach this word of hope.

It was the responsibility of the whole community of faith. Y'all bring comfort.

That was the charge.

I think that's still true.

All of us have a responsibility to encourage and bring a word of comfort to God's people.

And we can do it, not because of who we are and what we can say.

We can do it because God's promises are still true.

God's word of salvation is eternal.

And so we shout it from the mountaintop.

We remind each other with our songs and with our message of the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

This poem of hope transcends time and circumstances.

To quote one of my favorite verses,

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning.” (See Lamentations 3:22-23)

To say it another way,
God’s promises give us a sense of hope and purpose.
God’s promises bring us comfort and joy.

And so, each new day is an opportunity,
an opportunity to experience God’s steadfast love, the love that never
ceases.

Our lesson for today suggests some specific promises that can give God’s
people comfort and hope for a new day.

FORGIVENESS

The first promise is the promise of forgiveness.
Forgiveness is the first step on the road back home.

God’s people had heard a lot of harsh words during their time of captivity.
The prophets said that the Exile was God’s judgment.

God’s people had tossed aside justice and righteousness.
And now the chickens had come home to roost.

They and their children were being punished for the sins of the past.
They had tossed aside justice and righteousness
... so God had, in a manner of speaking, tossed aside his people.

Injustice and unrighteousness are a part of this story.
Indeed, it’s still true that when we toss aside justice and righteousness,
there are consequences for us and for our children.

But, we must always remember that the purpose of God’s judgment is
never to destroy.
The purpose of God’s judgment is to save and restore.
The unrelenting judgment of earlier prophets is unexpectedly replaced with
a word of hope.

You have paid double for your sins.
The time of judgment is over.

And now the time has come to speak tenderly to God's people.

This is always a delicate balance.

How can we promote justice and righteousness ...

and yet at the same time offer a way back home to those who have sinned?

Whenever I read this passage I think of the prodigal son.

The thing that brought him back from the far country was the love of his father.

He had sinned.

He had dishonored his family.

But, he believed that his father's love would be stronger than his sin.

Many people struggle because they know that they have sinned.

Lately this struggle has been the number one story in the news.

How do we deal with people who have sinned and want to come back home?

How can we judge?

Forgiveness cannot come from cheap grace.

The prophets had it right.

The Exile was the result of injustice and faithless behavior.

But, the tender word of the Lord is this:

God does not desire to keep any of us in exile forever.

God's justice is meant to bring about forgiveness and salvation.

EXILE AND RESTORATION TODAY

When we seek to preach God's word of comfort, we need to remember that most stories of exile begin with sin.

We have done wrong.

We have not been the people we should have been.

And this creates estrangement from God and from the people we love.

But, sins can be forgiven.

We can find our way back home.

Now don't misunderstand.

This is not an easy process.

God's people spent many years in Exile.

But, Exile was not the final answer.

There came a time when their sins were forgiven.

This is the word of comfort that the prophet brought to a captive people.

And this is the word of comfort that I bring to us today.

The loving Father tenderly waits for his children to come home from Exile.

In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

A HIGHWAY IN THE DESERT

So, the first word of comfort is a word of forgiveness.

The second word of comfort is the promise of a highway in the desert.

During the time of the Exile, God's people were a long way from home.

Even if they could be freed from the captivity of the Babylonians,
a great desert stood between them and their homeland.

There were too many miles and too many obstacles.

They couldn't make it back home again.

There was no road in the desert.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a similar situation.

We are surrounded by a desert, a situation that seems to offer no hope for
the future.

The prophet was given this word of comfort.

Not only would God's people make it back home;

God was going to make it easy for them.

God was going to build I 95 right in the middle of that desert.

God was going to tear down mountains and fill in valleys.

God was going to alter the landscape so that God's people could make it
back home.

We can imagine what it is like to build a superhighway in the desert.

Most of us have seen great building projects where the mountains have
been leveled and the valleys have been filled in.

But, in those days building a superhighway in the desert was well nigh impossible.

It would take a miracle.

And that was just what God was promising.

The glory of the Lord would be revealed in the building of this highway.

God would once again lead his people through the desert to the Promised Land

.... just as God had done once before in the Exodus from Egypt.

A NEW VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

God's people did eventually return the Promised Land.

Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonians and allowed all the people who had been taken captive to return to their homelands.

But, there was more to this word of comfort than just a return from Exile. This word of comfort would play a role in the continuing saga of God's salvation.

For example when John the Baptist comes to prepare the way of the Lord, guess what Scripture passage is quoted?

That's right. This one.

In the other lectionary lesson for today from the gospel of Mark we read that the good news about Jesus begins with a voice of one crying in the desert.

He is preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah.

And what kind of highway is this messenger preparing in the wilderness? It is the highway of repentance and forgiveness. (Mark 1:1-8)

Sound familiar?

But, John said that his highway is just a dirt road compared to the super-highway that is coming.

His baptism of water in the wilderness will give way to the Messiah's baptism of the Spirit.

God will be with God's people in a new way.

AN ETERNAL WORD FOR MORTALS

The eternal power of God's word is on display in this passage.
The words of the prophets continue to challenge and comfort God's people.

And so we learn to put our trust in that word and not in our own understanding.

In their exile, no doubt God's people had a hard time understanding and believing this word of comfort. Their perspective was limited.

God's people were (like us) mortal.
They were temporary.
They were like the grass and the flowers of the field.

The grass withers.
The flower fades.

Our hope and our perspective is also limited.
Sometimes we cannot see anything but exile and the desert that surrounds us.

But, suppose we could catch a vision of the eternal?
How might that change the way we look at things?

The Word of God gives us that eternal view.

We are as fleeting as the grass and flowers in the field.
But, the Bible tells us that the Word of the Lord stands forever.

God's Word is that interstate highway in the desert.

And what does this eternal Word teach us?
This Word teaches us that God is with us and for us.

This mighty God who builds a superhighway in the desert,
this great warrior who fights our battles,
is also the great Shepherd who speaks tenderly to his wayward and frightened sheep.

In our lesson for today we read,

“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.”

This is the final word of comfort.
The Lord is the Great Shepherd.

Jesus claimed Divinity in John’s gospel when He claimed that title.
Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd.” (John 10:14)

And this proved to be the ultimate word of comfort.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
And in Jesus Christ we are carried through the desert to the Promised
Land.

Today’s passage suggests that we should proclaim this message from the
mountaintops.

We have no reason to fear the power of the Empire.
Nothing can stand against the eternal word of God.

God has decided to lead God’s people home.
And we have been invited to be a part of that journey.

It’s Advent.
Let’s prepare the way.

Amen.