

A Voice of Comfort

2nd Sun. in Advent – 12/10/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Isaiah 40:1-11 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 2 [The prophet and all God's people are commanded to comfort the people in this way,] **“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.”**

Introduction

✘ What a great hymn we just sang, “Comfort, comfort, ye My people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God” (*LSB* 347:1). Some people may think the tune isn't “lively” enough, but I think it sets the right mood; one of peace and serenity in the midst of a very busy time of year. It's like a voice that gently wraps all of our anxiety up in the strong and loving arms of our Savior. In that way it's a beautiful expression of the text we have before us here today.

→ Well, at least until we look more closely at verses three and four. Because those words hit us right between the eyes like a bullhorn on the job site calling us back from lunch. It's a prophecy of John the Baptizer's voice crying out, “Make way, make way! Comin' through! Come on, move, move, move!” He's telling every one of us that we can't just sit on our hands; we can't just relax in our spiritual recliner now that we know we've been saved by God's amazing grace. No, Isaiah foretells John's message to every true believer, “Get up dear Christian and get with it.” Oh, that blows the mood.

✘ You see, this text is a turning point for Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 have been primarily judgment, ending with a prophecy that the people will be taken into captivity in Babylon. And then, here with chapter 40, he introduces a new section where the primary message is one of comfort.

→ It begins well enough: “‘Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...’” (v.1). But then the prophet's voice makes an abrupt change.

I. Anything standing in God's way is leveled

✘ The comforting voice goes away and it's as if a voice cries out that anything standing in God's way will be bulldozed. Verses 3-5, “A voice cries: ‘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. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

→ “Get that earthmover in here! Here comes the blasting crew! Watch out, dynamite coming through! Hurry up with those bulldozers!” That's the voice we hear from Isaiah. Every valley and every mountain will be leveled. It's definitely a hard-hat only kind of text. The land must be leveled because a highway is going through. It's not going around the mountains. It's not going through the valleys because there aren't going to be any more mountains or valleys.

→ What is this highway? It is the coming Messiah, God's one and only way into His eternal presence. I mean, He's God! He doesn't reroute for anybody. Nothing can stand in His way – not solid granite peaks, not deep, steep ravines. So, yes, if you choose to rebel against His plan for your heart, mind and soul, you're getting bulldozed.

✘ This is why 700 years later John the Baptizer came. His message was just what God told Isaiah to foretell, “The Lord is coming! Prepare!” That is to say, “Repent of your sin-filled, self-centered, rebellious ways!”

→ Of course, John wasn't concerned about mountains being run over. He came as God's voice of concern to see that people didn't get flattened. He cares deeply about everyone's soul,

because lives that aren't level with God; that are crooked, that aren't perfectly in line with the rule of God's Law – will be blasted away.

→ When the heavy machinery comes rolling through on the established day of the Messiah's return, anyone who is unrepentant; anyone boldly living in sin will not be an innocent victim.

✘ We all get excited about Christmas coming; about the Messiah being born of course! That was His first coming, but Isaiah here, along with God's other prophets warn about His second coming. Malachi asked, "Who can endure the day of His coming, and who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire..." (Mal 3:2).

→ That's a serious question; one that every single person must ask of him/herself. "Who can stand?" What about someone whose words are thoughtless; who hurts the feelings of others? What about a person who thinks of him/herself before and above God; who is selfish, greedy or lustful? What about the one who is living in apathy; who's just going through life without a care; who is indifferent; who cares less about the King of the universe?

→ God's Word here is very clear; no obstacle will be allowed to stand in His way – least of all sin. And so John cries out; Isaiah cries out: "Prepare your hearts! Repent of all sin – known and unknown; both original and actual sin!"

✘ You see, Advent is a time of repentance; a time of both inward and outward preparation. For when the Lord comes, anyone standing boldly in sin and unbelief will be bulldozed.

→ Wow Isaiah; come on John, where's the comfort in all of that?

II. A voice cries out, "we have our reasons."

✘ Yet Isaiah's not even done. In verse six, he says that "a voice" tells him to "Cry" out. What? That... "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades..." (vv. 6-8a).

→ Where's the comfort in that? That sounds like nothing but hopelessness, helplessness and desperation! Is God saying that we are all like grass clippings that get mowed up and thrown out? We're just rotting compost? Flowers – once beautiful, yes, but now we're all wilted and droopy and dead?

→ That's a pretty pessimistic message, isn't it? Yet, it is, as verse seven says, merely "the breath of the LORD" blowing the truth of His Word upon us; the truth we all need to acknowledge and accept. You say you want evidence? Okay: hair loss, crow's feet, a larger dress or pants size, illness, disease, loss of memory, declining balance and strength, less energy than we used to have at the end of the work day; these are only a few of the constant reminders that we're fading already. And if you're younger, trust me your time is coming!

- Worse, so many of the things we try to accomplish often seem so futile. You spend years saving for retirement, then the loved one you wanted to spend it with dies. You think you've invested everything toward a loving, trusting relationship with your children, but now it's only tension and resentment. You do all the right things to save yourself for your future spouse, prepare yourself for marriage, and now you wonder if anybody's ever going to come your way.

✘ "The grass withers, the flower fades" (v.7). Where's the comfort in that?

III. Comfort in God's Strength & Care

✘ Truthfully, if that is the way we see ourselves – as flowers; as grass; as temporary; as weak – then there is comfort in Isaiah's and John's united voice here.

- Because we are so weak and helplessly unable to save ourselves, it is indeed very comforting to hear the voice of our strong and irresistible God! As verse eight says, “The grass withers, the flower fades, **but** the Word of our God will stand forever.”
- ⊗ Now, how does that sound? An eternal, never changing Word; the same truth that Isaiah, John, you and I, and our grandchildren can all count on; a message that will – that cannot change no matter what fads or fancies or new inventions come and go in this world, because it is the Word, as verse five says, that “the mouth of the LORD has spoken”. How does that sound...really?
- It sounds like something you and I and all people can really count on; that we can build our lives around; that we can be taught; that we can teach and that we know will always be true; that will absolutely come about!
- It means when John announces that the Lord is coming, He comes; when Jesus says in John 3:18, “Whoever believes in [the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already”, then that is the one and only bottom line regarding God’s way to forgiveness and salvation. So, when the voice cries out that every hill and valley will be leveled, then no one and nothing can resist Him.
- ⊗ How does *that* sound? Well, I know, most of us like to think of ourselves as strong, independent individuals. But if we want to be big, tough, and ruggedly independent and stand up to God...or even stand up against God as we are – sin and all – then we are setting ourselves up as mountains in God’s way. And the last thing any of us should want to do is think that our voice; that our power and our plan has any chance against the God who moves mountains.
- I mean, who really wants a god with a wimpy voice that we can ignore? Or a god with a voice that speaks wishes but not truths, a god whose threats and promises will probably never happen?
- If that’s the kind of voice we want to hear from God, then there is no comfort in Isaiah’s voice today.
- ⊗ But, if we realize that we really are grass or a flower that fades, then that’s the very voice we need to hear.
- For God’s is a voice that is strong, clear and irresistible; a voice whose promises will be accomplished; a voice that delivers on what He Promises; that gives us the strength and certainty we lack. So, dear Christian, hear that voice; the voice of Yahweh proclaimed from the “high mountain”; the voice proclaimed “with strength”; the voice of “good news” from God’s prophet (v.9) in verses 10-11, “Behold your God! Behold, the Lord Yahweh comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”
- And again in verse two, “[your] warfare is ended, [your] iniquity is pardoned, (and) [you have] received from Yahweh’s hand a double portion (of that forgiveness) for all [your] sins.”
- ⊗ Yes, this is true comfort for us today! Not just a wish or a nice idea. This is something that I know will happen! In fact it’s something that has happened, for the Lord God has come, just as Isaiah knew, just as John proclaimed.
- This Word from our God stands as a never-changing truth; an indisputable fact: Jesus has come, born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. He lived. He died on the cross. He rose from the grave and now our iniquity is pardoned. We are fully forgiven!

→ Now the Messiah Isaiah promised is gathering up His helpless lambs and holding us close to His heart. It's as if Jesus is carefully picking us up as faded flowers and pressing us gently into His eternal Book of Life (Rev. 21:27) to preserve and keep us forever His.

⊗ Right now we may be aging and fading, but in Christ we have eternal youth. We may feel withered and crushed at the end of the day, but Jesus constantly refreshes and renews us for the Day to come. We may think our dreams; our plans and our families are coming to nothing, but Christ has plans for you and me that are beyond our wildest dreams.

→ Because, when the voice of the Lord speaks these promises as He has through Isaiah, nothing can resist Him. No obstacle will prevent Him from doing all of this for us.

Conclusion

⊗ There's confidence in that strong, clear voice, isn't there? Comfort for us withered and faded souls. Yes, it's a voice that shouts, "Make way!"; a voice that tells us, "You are grass." But it is a voice of good tidings whose words will stand forever; the voice of our God; of our Savior and our loving Lord; the voice of comfort for all of us, His people. Amen.