

Comfort My People

Isaiah 40:1-11

An English professor was caught speeding one day. When the officer asked her why she was driving so fast, she quoted Robert Frost: *“I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.”* The officer, obviously familiar with the poet, replied: *“Yes Ma’am, but Frost chose the road less traveled and unfortunately for you, this wasn’t it!”*

Clearly, that was not a very comforting word. The officer had the woman dead to rights, and he wasn’t about to let her off the hook. In a way it’s similar to the situation we find in our Old Testament lesson for today from the book of Isaiah. At the time Isaiah wrote our text, the people of Judah were dangling on the hook of God’s wrath and anger. He had them dead to rights for their sinful idolatry. That’s why they were being harassed by the Assyrians with the future threat of also being captured by the Babylonians and taken into exile. To put it simply, they needed a comforting word.

So it was the God commissioned Isaiah to prophesy these wonderful words in our text: **“COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE, SAYS YOUR GOD. 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!”** To His people who were in bondage and deep spiritual trouble, God wanted to bring a message of comfort and hope: namely, that in His mercy He had let them off the hook of His wrath and anger, and in due time He would come to rescue them and set them free.

My friends, that is the same message you and I need to hear. Perhaps we are in bondage to some addiction, enslaved to our lusts and passions, and floundering in our Christian walk. Maybe we are in deep spiritual trouble, overwhelmed with fears and doubts, sadness and depression, guilt and anxiety. We may even feel like we’re in exile, far away from God and His love, without a friend in the world. Or it may simply be the day to day cares and burdens of life that are bringing us down – things like sickness, hassles at work, car trouble, bills, broken relationships, you name it.

But whatever it is, we are all in slavery to our sinful nature and its temptations to selfishness, pride and anger. And so we are in need of a comforting word.

Thankfully Isaiah shares it with us in our text, when he says: ‘COMFORT, COMFORT MY PEOPLE, SAYS YOUR GOD.’ You’ll notice that he repeats it, just to make sure we don’t miss the message – that God has come to comfort His people. Of course, this prophecy was fulfilled that first Advent season when Jesus Christ our Savior, clothed Himself in human flesh and blood, so that He can sympathize with us in our weakness and at the same time supply us with mercy and grace to help and comfort us in our time of need.

Now, in Hebrew the word ‘comfort’ can mean: ‘to bring rest.’ And that’s exactly what Jesus has done for you and me. He’s brought us rest for our souls – rest and relief from our sin and shame. He did that by letting us off the hook of God’s wrath and anger and taking it for us at the cross. You see, Jesus died on Calvary’s cross to conquer and destroy our sins, and shed His blood, to make us whiter than snow – which is the best white Christmas of all. And so, we can simply rest in His love, comforted with the assurance that all our sins have been forgiven.

In fact, our English word ‘comfort’ expresses that very idea. You’ll notice that it contains the word ‘fort’ like a fortress or shelter, because it comes from the Latin word that means: ‘to make strong, to fortify.’ Well, that’s just what the comfort of Jesus’ Gospel does for you and me – it strengthens us with pardon and peace in the shelter of His love. It brings us into the fortress of His kingdom, where we are safe from death and hell. You know, the reason so many people fear death is because it is the penalty for our sins. It is God’s just condemnation upon the whole sinful human race. Eternal death in hell is the punishment we all deserve for our iniquities.

In our text, Isaiah described it as our warfare. That’s because our sins put us in a war with God, that we can’t possibly win. But the comfort Jesus brings us today, is that He won the war and put an end to it by His sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. That’s why our text says that our warfare is ended and our iniquity is pardoned. Isaiah depicted it like a soldier, who has completed his tour of duty. Imagine if you had a son or brother, a niece or mother stationed in Iraq. You’d constantly be on pins and needles, wondering if they’re alright. But if they finished

their tour of duty and returned home, suddenly, you'd be overjoyed! No more fear, no more worry, no more doubt. They are safe and sound. That's what Jesus has accomplished by His death on the cross. He has brought us back Home to God, where we are finally safe and sound – safe from sin, death and hell forever!

Not only that, but for Jesus' sake, God says that we have now received double for our sins. Not the double punishment of death and hell that we deserve, but the double blessing of forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus' name. You see, the idea of paying double for your sins is part of the Mosaic law, which required that anyone caught stealing had to pay back double what he had taken. Well, in an even better way, our sin has been doubly paid for, by the holy, precious blood of Christ as well as His innocent suffering and death. And for that reason, we have received a double blessing – God's forgiveness and absolution right here and now, and also His promise that some day He will come back again to take us to the courts of heaven, where we will live with Him forever. That is the double blessing that we receive, simply through faith in Jesus Christ.

How then, do we stay ready for Jesus' return? Only by remaining in that truth faith all our days. Isaiah put it this way in our text: "IN THE WILDERNESS, PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD; MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD." He's referring to the ancient custom of building a highway for the king. You see, whenever a monarch would come to a city, the people would erect a special roadway for his arrival. As our text says: "EVERY VALLEY SHALL BE LIFTED UP, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL BE MADE LOW." In short, the king needs a smooth road to walk on. Isaiah was talking about the obstacles of sin and unbelief in our heart, which Jesus came to remove. As a matter of fact, when he said that every valley shall be 'lifted' up, he used one of the verbs that is normally used in the Old Testament for forgiveness. It literally means: 'to lift up and carry away.' And it's the picture of Jesus taking the huge burden of our guilt, lifting it off of us, placing it on His own shoulders and carrying it all the way to the cross, where He removed it once and for all.

In other words, the only way to be prepared for the coming of the King, is to let the King, our Lord Jesus, apply that gift of forgiveness to our heart each day, so that the valleys or potholes can

be filled in, and the hills or bumps can be smoothed out. We could think of the potholes like our sins of omission that need to be eradicated, and the bumps are our sins of commission that need to be erased. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. He's the One, who prepares us for the way of the Lord. He erects that roadway of faith in our heart, by using the Law and the Gospel to show us our sin and our Savior. He removes our sin and guilt, enables us to daily renounce and reject the lies of Satan, just like at our Baptism, and to take authority over them in Jesus' name. Likewise, He fills in the potholes, as we spend time each day in God's Word, so that we know what His will for us is. And in that Word, as well as the Sacrament we receive His gracious forgiveness and redemption, which empowers us to live for Him. That's how the Spirit strengthens our faith and gets us ready for the coming of the King.

My friends, that's what Isaiah was getting at in our text, when he said: "ALL FLESH IS GRASS, AND ALL ITS BEAUTY IS LIKE THE FLOWER OF THE FIELD. THE GRASS WITHERS, THE FLOWER FADES, BUT THE WORD OF OUR GOD WILL STAND FOREVER." That word is the Word of the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus died to save us, so that by faith in Him we might be forgiven and free. That was the seed of faith that the Holy Spirit planted in our heart, when we were baptized. But just like a seed needs tender care and nurture to grow into a beautiful flower, we know that God is constantly working through the Word and Sacraments to help us grow. He's working all the days of our life to tend and nurture our faith, so that we don't wither and fade. Indeed, the word 'fade' is actually related to the word for 'corpse.' But thankfully, God the Master Gardener, saved us from all of that. He gave us new life in His Son Jesus Christ, who came into this world to pull out all the thorns and thistles of our sin, and to remove all the weeds of our guilt. And some day He will transplant us as a beautiful new blossom in His heavenly garden, where we will have no more pain or sorrow or suffering. That is the comfort of the Gospel!

The story is told of a father who took his two children swimming in the Atlantic ocean, when he suddenly realized that the tide was pulling them out to sea. Knowing his limitations, he told his older daughter, "*Honey, I've got to get your younger brother to shore. When I do, I'll come back for you. I want you to float on your back until I return.*" With that, the father swam away, brought his

son to shore, and in a state of near exhaustion went back with some lifeguards to find his daughter. But she wasn't where they expected her to be. Farther and farther they searched. Finally, after two hours, they spotted her floating in the water and she was okay. When they got her on board the boat, one of the lifeguards asked her: *"Weren't you frightened out in the ocean all by yourself."* Without missing a beat, the young girl replied: *"I wasn't afraid. My father told me he'd come back for me, and I knew he would!"*

Dear friends, like that young girl, we too can have a calm, confident trust in our father's love for us. We need not fear death nor life, because we know that Jesus is coming back for us to take us to our Heavenly mansion. That is the comfort we receive constantly in God's Holy Word and Sacraments – the comforting message that Jesus came in the flesh to rescue us from our bondage and captivity, to put an end to the hard service of our sin, and in its place to give us the double blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. May that strengthen us in our faith in Him and in our service in His kingdom, so that we prepare the way for His coming, by sharing His Word with others, until He returns. Amen.