

A Promise of Peace

Isaiah 40:1-11 (Advent 2)

What do you want out of Christmas? Children, do you want lots of really cool presents? Is there maybe one particular toy or video game you would like? Adults, is there anything in particular you wish someone would give you this year? Or do you maybe just want to be able to gather for Christmas with your family and celebrate like you usually do? What is it you want out of Christmas this year? However you answer that question, God's desire for Christmas is centered not on what we want this holiday to be like, but completely on his promise of Jesus' coming, a promise of peace as God proclaims comfort to hearts burdened by sin.

Israel was in need of comfort. The book of Isaiah really can be divided into two parts. The first thirty nine of its sixty six chapters might be called the "law" half of the book. In general the message in those chapters is God rebuking the people of Israel. The Holy Spirit led Isaiah to begin with God's bitter lament over what he sees from his people. Chapter 1 says, **"Hear this, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for the Lord has spoken. I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey knows its owner's manager, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand. How terrible it will be for that sinful nation, for a people loaded with guilt, offspring who are corrupt! They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel. They have deserted him and turned back."** (1:2-4) Then the first "half" of Isaiah ends with the gloomy prophecy that King Hezekiah's prideful display of wealth to the envoys from Babylon would hasten the time when the Babylonian invaders would strip the temple and take Jerusalem's people into exile.

With this news, Israel was in desperate need of some good news. Chapter 40 abruptly announces that good news. The message of rebuke and guilt is now to be followed by the message of comfort that God desired to give to his troubled people. It is comfort spoken to their sin-burdened hearts binding up his wounded, broken people, comfort centered on his promise of Jesus' coming. It's so important to God that his people be comforted, he says it twice. **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."** (vs. 1-2)

In spite of Israel's rebellion God still loves his people. The harsh discipline of captivity and the stern rebukes of the prophets will bring about the desired repentance. When the people of Jerusalem in captivity read these words, they would hear God's desire for tender words of comfort to be spoken. That comfort is expressed in three statements. (1) Their warfare, their hard labor from such conflict was over. The time which God had appointed for their heavy discipline was going to come to an end. God speaks of it as if it was already done. (2) Their sin, their guilt is paid for. Certainly Israel didn't pay for it themselves. Seventy years, in fact no amount of time served in captivity would ever pay for the dreadful idolatry by which Judah had insulted God. Guilt could only be removed by the blood of an innocent victim, one that God promised to send as he speaks of this as already a completed fact. (3) Instead of punishment for their sins, Israel would receive from God's own hand "double" for all their sins. God would bless doubly through the promised Messiah as through the Savior they would receive forgiveness of sins and life.

Comfort is what God desired to be spoken to his wounded, broken, sin-burdened people. Comfort is what he gave through the promise of the Savior's coming. Yet before that time arrived, God was preparing people for that coming through his faithful messengers. They would be God's voice to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. It was through them God's desired message of comfort would be proclaimed. Isaiah wrote. **"A voice is calling out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. In the wasteland make a level highway for our God. Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The rugged ground will become level, and the rough places will become a plain."** (vs. 3-5)

When the Love's Truck Stop and Hardees were being built off of I-43, it was interesting to see all the work that was done to the land before construction on the building itself could begin. I watched dirt being moved, land being leveled off, and extra dirt being hauled away from the site. It seemed like they were working for weeks just preparing the land for the truck stop that was going to be built. Preparation takes time and needs people to do the preparing.

That's what this voice who speaks for God would do - prepare people for Jesus' coming. In order for Jesus to come and make a home in the hearts of the people God wants to comfort, everything must be made ready for his arrival. Let all the mountains and hills be leveled. All the ditches and valleys filled to make a royal desert highway ready to receive the Lord's Savior upon his arrival. Mark applies these verses to John the Baptist as a voice in the wilderness who prepared the people for Jesus. However Isaiah focuses more on the message itself of that voice, than on the specific voice. Those mountains of pride, self satisfaction and self-righteousness are tools of Satan to fool foolish sinners into thinking that they are majestic saints worthy of God's reward. "Let them be leveled! Repent," cries the voice. The valleys of despair over sin were also to be filled up with comfort. "The Lord is coming. Prepare to receive him!" When all preparations have been made then all will see the glory of the Lord - Christ's deliverance from sin.

In this Advent season there are so many voices preparing us to celebrate Christmas. Those voices are the ones that are directing our expectations for this holiday season. With so many voices that are speaking in the world around us, it all sounds like noise sometimes and we have a hard time sorting them out. So we grasp onto just a few and really focus on listening to them. What voices are preparing the way for the Lord in your heart? Are they leveling off those mountains? Are they filling in the valleys? What is the comfort they are calling out to you?

When Israel was given this news about exile in Babylon, many spent a lot of time listening to other voices which told them exactly what they wanted to hear. The temple would remain as it was. Jerusalem would not be destroyed. It's people would not be taken into captivity. The heart of the problem was ignored giving them no need for comfort. Like Israel, we would rather spend time listening to the voices that tell what we would prefer to hear about ourselves than what we need to hear. It's hard to hear the truth. Our sinful nature would rather ignore that call to repent. The truth about our sin and what we deserve because of it can be a harsh reality that no one wants to hear. Maybe think of it this way. Which kind of person do you appreciate more in the long-run? The one who sugar coats something because he knows that's what you want to hear and what makes you feel good about yourself? Or the one who tells you the truth no matter how hard it is to hear?

A voice that speaks for God, a faithful messenger will always speak the truth getting his message from God. Isaiah writes, **"A voice was saying, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry out?' All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside. Grass withers, flowers fade, when the breath of the Lord blows on them. Yes, the people are grass. Grass withers, flowers fade, but the Word of our God endures forever." (vs. 6-8)** Analyze the voices that you are listening to this Advent season. Hold them up against God's enduring Word on the basis of Law and Gospel.

The Law accuses with the harsh reality of sin and calls us to repent. Everything on earth, all flesh, is thoroughly corrupt with sin, and its beauty is only superficial, as lasting as the delicacy of a cut flower. In one day the petals are shriveled and brown. In one day newly mown damp green grass becomes dry hay. The breath of the Lord has blown on everything sinful. Even God's people will on their own last only as long as cut grass. God's withering judgment strikes all our boasts, all confidence in our own basic goodness, and our moral ability. It might seem odd that such depressing news should come so soon after God urged preaching of comfort. Of what comfort is this

sweeping verdict of mankind's mortality, sin, and transient nature in this world? Its value is that it refuses to allow God's people to place their hopes in the wrong place - themselves. These are painful truths you don't want to hear, but need to hear. Yet not as the final word.

To those who hear that call to repent, the Law is followed by the good news that God's Word of grace, in direct contrast to temporary man, stands forever. That word of grace resounds throughout Scripture. God's promise of comfort abounds today from wherever that Word is proclaimed and taught, from the baptismal font, and from the communion rail. Hear that good news of comfort the voice is to proclaim pointing into the manger this Christmas to the one lying there wrapped in cloths! **"Get up on a high mountain, O Zion, you herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, you herald of good news. Lift it up! Do not be afraid! Say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' Look, God the Lord will come with strength, and his arm is ruling for him. Look, his reward is with him. The result of his work is in front of him. Like a shepherd he will care for his flock. With his arm he will gather the lambs. He will lift them up on his lap. He will gently lead the nursing mothers."** (vs. 9-11)

Listening to God's voice whether it's in the wilderness like John the Baptist, in a church sanctuary like this one, a classroom of a Christian day school, or anywhere else the purpose of the called voice remains the same - to prepare people for Jesus' coming (both his first coming like John did and his second as is happening even today). The messenger cries out: We are nothing. He is everything. We are born to die. He comes to give life. Through God's faithful messengers who speak his enduring Word in its truth, God is speaking to the world and giving you what he desires for you to have this Christmas and beyond - comfort. And with comfort comes peace. **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."** (vs. 1-2) Rejoicing in God's promise of peace through the comfort he gives, God is exceeding our expectations for Christmas. Amen