

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort my people

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This time of Advent is always an odd contrast between the many celebrations that normally occur this time of year, including the anticipation of Christmas, and then the actual purpose of Advent in the church, and in the bible readings for these four Sundays. The reason the traditional church colour for Advent is purple, the same colour for Lent, is that this is a penitential season. This means it's a time to reflect on our own sinfulness and our need for a saviour. And the bible readings match that.

So, we get verses that tell us that people are like the grass, their beauty fades as quickly as the flowers in a field. We get Second Peter telling us that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire" (2 Peter 3:10, NRSV). We are confronted with our own mortality in the midst of many celebrations. But we are also reminded of God's great promises. In Advent we anticipate the arrival of the promised Messiah, knowing we get to celebrate his birth at Christmas. We are shown once more why we need this Messiah and the good news that he brings.

The temptation is just to short cut to the good news. Just celebrate Christmas, the birth of the saviour, the peace on earth and goodwill to all men, and ignore the rest. But in doing so the cry of 'comfort, comfort' in our Isaiah reading doesn't hit us in the way it should. This is a word of tender mercy and compassion after a very long and dark night of judgment. The prophet Isaiah was very clear: what happened to God's people was because of their sin. We shouldn't brush over that. We can't jump straight to words of peace and prosperity.

Prior to chapter 40 of Isaiah, the words spoken in God's name are difficult and hard to hear. The people have rebelled against God. They've lived at the expense of their neighbours, putting their own desires above the needs of others. Chapter after chapter describes how the people of Jerusalem prospered through wickedness, oppression, lies, and injustice, refusing to heed the prophets' calls to repent and be reconciled to God.

Here's a selection of God's words of judgment from Isaiah chapter five: You call evil good and good evil. You put darkness for light and light for darkness. You put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. You are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight. You acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights. You have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

The people did not heed the warnings, did not return to the Lord. And so came the judgment. The city of Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians, a portion of its residents taken into exile, and the city left in ruins. The prophets made it unmistakably clear that the destruction of the city and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength; they were a well-deserved punishment from God.

What is striking then is that not that there are now persons in need of comfort, but that God commands they be comforted. "Her sad days are gone, and her sins are pardoned," the text says, referring to the city of Jerusalem. But why should she receive comfort? Persons who serve time for a crime do not typically receive such comfort on the day of their release. They have been judged deserving of their penalty, and the penalty is complete, but now they must still prove their worthiness. Even though they've done the time, surely the people of Jerusalem are not deserving of comfort according to our understanding of justice. But God insists, indeed commands, that they be comforted.

The first expression of this comfort is the way God still identifies them as 'my people'. Though multiple chapters of Isaiah show deeds that are not fitting for the people of God, he still continues to be their God. God does not overlook or ignore those sinful behaviours, and even in the subsequent punishment, God did not abandon them. The second expression of comfort is the command to speak 'tenderly to Jerusalem'. Compassion, not condemnation, should determine how Jerusalem is treated. The condemnation had been spoken and delivered, and now is the time of restoration.

So a new voice joins the scene: "Clear the way through the wilderness for the Lord! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!" This is not a highway for the exiles to return to Jerusalem, but for God to return. The implication is that God has abandoned the holy city, but was not returning to restore it. The time of the Lord's long absence from Jerusalem has come to an end. The glory of the Lord will be revealed. And this revelation is very important, because from the exiles' perspective it has been hidden, and a hidden God is a terrifying God. But this season of hiddenness has come to an end. "Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The Lord has spoken!" (Isaiah 40:5).

Anyone who had doubted God's presence would see this and know that God had not only spoken a redeeming and comforting word to his people but also had the power to fulfil it. And this further serves to highlight the disparity between God and his people. They have sinned and rebelled, but God has stayed true. They are fragile like grass that withers, but God is powerful.

The almighty God makes his presence known. And then bends down to gather his little flock and carry them close to his heart. The message given is confident and hopeful, 'Here is your God.' Here is a God who comes to shepherd and feed the flock, to gather the lambs, to lead the mother sheep, to bring comfort. Here is God in whom one may have great hope. The deepest comfort and greatest joy is the power of God at work in their midst, providing, protecting, and guiding them with gentleness.

This text doesn't promise that all suffering will cease. It doesn't deny or immediately change the brokenness of humanity that led to the exile. But it does show us God's heart. God loves his people enough to warn them of their sin. And God loves his people enough to restore them and bring them comfort after they suffer the consequences of their sin. We should never seek one without the other.

Knowing that God is compassionate and merciful, enables us to take his rebuke and correction willingly. Knowing that God always seeks to restore us to himself means that even in times where God seems hidden from us, we should not despair. Knowing that we wither like grass and fade away like flowers give us pause, but the word of our God is forever true. He does care for us as a shepherd cares for the sheep. He carries us in his arms, even as we face the day of judgment. He is still our God, and we are still his people.

So, let us rejoice in all that God has done for us and for all his people. And may we be prepared to meet him, whenever that day comes, trusting in saving work of Christ Jesus, our Messiah, our Redeemer, and the Prince of Peace. Amen.

May God who is eternally faithful, give you his peace which passes all human understanding, and keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus, until he comes again as victorious Lord of all. Amen.