

Wednesday, November 30, 2022 – Midweek Advent I

Isaiah 40:1-11 (ESV) – “Waiting with Comfort”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.’ You, who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Thus far our text.

When you think of the word “comfort”, what do you think of? Speaking a kind word at a funeral, reassuring the bereaved that their loved one is now in heaven with God, rather than abandoned to the grave? Relaxing in your favorite chair, watching the football game, while sipping either a hot chocolate or something a little bit stronger? Spending time with your spouse, just being together, talking about everything or nothing, and just relaxing after a long day’s work? In our text, Isaiah talks about the comfort that he was inspired to provide to the people of Israel. They were nearing the end of a horrible captivity in Babylon, where many of the people were killed, and others were beaten and abused and whipped into submission. They were despondent and depressed, having abandoned all hope for the future, and were just trying to muster the strength to get through the day. Even though they knew the promise of God, that He would redeem them from their captivity and slavery, it had been so long that they had given up hope. Isaiah tells them that they were to receive comfort from God – in fact, God was so emphatic that they receive this message of comfort, that He said it twice for effect. Their hard service was completed; their sin had been atoned for. Their time of slavery to the Babylonians was drawing to an end, and they would be restored to freedom once again.

But Isaiah doesn’t stop there. He continues on to talk about the one that is coming soon, John the Baptist, who would be the forebear to Christ, the one crying out in the wilderness. You remember, we hear from John every Advent season. He was the one that thought himself low enough that he wasn’t worthy of even stooping to untie Jesus’ sandals. That’s the real comfort that would serve to give hope to the people of Israel. The glory of the Lord is revealed in Jesus the Christ – He is the one that changes everything. It’s great and wonderful, indeed long-awaited, to be freed from temporal

slavery at the hands of a foreign and evil people. It's quite another thing for the salvation of the entire world to come into their midst. Jesus' coming in the manger at Bethlehem, and more importantly, His death and resurrection at Calvary and the empty tomb is what gives hope and a future. The true comfort for the human race, the only reason for the courage to continue on, is the fact that Christ took our sins and the sins of all mankind upon Himself on the tree of the cross. Otherwise, the comfort of changed temporal circumstances improved upon is short-lived and extremely limited in scope.

However, just in case the Israelites were tempted to misinterpret Isaiah's words of Gospel comfort, the Law is brought to bear just a couple of verses later. Isaiah makes it very clear that this deliverance and redemption is not brought about by anything that the Israelites did to deserve it. "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." That doesn't sound like a very comforting message, does it? We know what it's like when grass dies, don't we – it's covered by a blanket of snow! It's depressing, it's lifeless, and it's dead and gone – just like we are based upon our sins and our sinfulness. There's no hope in dead grass – just death and destruction, rot and brownness, rather than greenness and life. If we are honest with ourselves, we are truly counted with the dead grass. We sin against God every day by our thoughts, words and deeds. Even if we aren't actively sinning against God, we are thinking about it, which amounts to the same sentence being deserved. We don't fear and love God above all things; we don't love our neighbors as ourselves. But, because of Christ, and His work on our behalf, our works and strivings aren't what ultimately determine what

happens to us. Jesus comes and changes everything. The Word of our God stands forever. God promised to redeem the Israelites, and He did – they no longer were going to be in captivity but would be freed from their worldly oppressors. He promised to send the Savior of the world, and He did. He was foretold by John, came in the manger in an unassuming manner at Bethlehem, and went on to be the Savior of the world at the cross. Even though we should rightly be DESTROYED, not just enslaved, because of our sinfulness, we aren't because of God's love and His steadfastness and His keeping of His promises. He has truly done everything for our salvation!

When you think of preparations for Christmas, what do you think of? Making cookies and other goodies (as we should!), purchasing gifts for our loved ones and friends, planning out the big meal for Christmas Day? Preparing for special worship services to mark these special days – Advent services, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day special services – involves working on music for some, working on sermons for others, involves special preparation for the Altar Guild and the Elders. But, most importantly, Jesus comforts us with His presence. He comforts us with the knowledge that is repeated to us as often as is necessary that He is our Savior, that He has redeemed us, and that the frailties of this human condition will not be with us forever. We won't always have to endure the crosses that afflict our human bodies – the pain, illness, sorrow and mourning that are part of our lives on this sinful earth. They will be removed from us when God's time is right, and His timing is always perfect.

As we prepare for the day of Christmas, which is the point of the season of Advent, we also prepare for the Day of the Lord, which will come like a thief in the night. We prepare for this earth-shattering, ground-quaking event by being comforted

that Christ is with us, forgiving us for our many sins, and restoring us to Himself by His power, motivated by His love. We are comforted in knowing that He will usher us into heaven when His time comes, and we will see Him face-to-face, without worrying that our sinfulness will destroy us in His perfect presence. We are comforted by the fact that until then, He is with us in His Word and His Sacraments, to strengthen our faith and our reliance upon Him, and to remind us that He is ultimately in control of everything – the devil, the world, and our sinful nature are conquered by His coming and living and dying and rising again. And, most importantly, knowing that He loves us as the crown of His creation, and has done everything to cause our salvation to come about comforts us. He wasn't content to leave us in our sins; He came to us and did what was necessary to restore us to Himself, to redeem us from our slavery to sin, and to perfect His love in us. Thanks be to God for His gift of comfort and peace, of salvation and ultimate redemption, foretold from of old by Isaiah, reinforced by John the Baptist, and given to us by the work of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.