



GOD'S COMFORT

Isaiah 40:1-5

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This Advent we're reading Isaiah 40 and asking, "Why is Jesus Good News?" In this sermon I'd like to show you that Jesus is good news because he brings us God's Comfort.

The Thanksgiving holiday is a time when we like to enjoy the comfort of good food, friends and family. But even with a four day weekend, it's only momentary comfort. Soon all the leftovers are eaten, the football games are over, and everyone goes back home. Then it's back to Struggleville.

I'm thankful that the Advent season always comes on the heels of Thanksgiving. Advent points us to the coming of Christ, whose comfort is far better than the most wonderful pleasures we can ever imagine. As we'll see in Isaiah 40, Jesus brings what we desire most, and what our world needs more than anything else.

JESUS COMFORTS US WITH GOD'S ETERNAL PEACE

It's easy to become cynical about politics. Each election cycle brings new courageous reformers, but they're no match for the impenetrable defenses of our great bureaucracy. Only a few years ago, Barack Obama rode into the White House on a wave of hope for the change he would bring. Today, his approval ratings are at rock bottom. For our President's sake and for ours, I wish it weren't so. Yet this ebb and flow of hope is so predictable. Who can blame us for cynicism?

It was into a similar, deep cynicism that the prophet Isaiah spoke words of hope, announcing the advent (coming) of Jesus Christ in Isaiah 40. Some 300 years had passed since the glory days of King Solomon's empire. It was only a matter of time before the Babylonian empire swept them away into exile. Like the people of Afghanistan today, the Israelites were hardened by conflict, generation after generation of instability and violence. Constant upheaval was their way of life. Warfare was all they had ever known.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah 40:1

These words come as quite a surprise. The preceding 39 chapters of Isaiah are overwhelmingly gloomy, so the change of tone here is startling. So startling, in fact, that many contemporary critics can't imagine that the same author who wrote the initial 39 chapters also wrote this one.

Even though there's continuity in language and grammar throughout all of Isaiah, most contemporary critics posit that there was a "Second Isaiah" who wrote hundreds of years after the so-called "First Isaiah." Some critics take it further and posit additional editors as "Third Isaiah," "Fourth Isaiah," and so on. If you take a university course on the Old Testament, it's quite likely that you'll be presented with some variation on this theme.

If what these critics say is true, then we should be every bit as cynical about the promises of Isaiah 40 as we are about our government. Here's their theory in a nutshell: that the change of tone in Isaiah 40, together with Isaiah's accurate description of future events like the Babylonian captivity, rule out any possibility that one person could have written the whole thing. However, in our recent survey of the Old Testament we saw that the entire story is jam packed with tone changes as well as accurate future predictions. God's happy promises of redemption are sandwiched within his solemn warnings against sin. You may remember from Deuteronomy that Moses was the first to warn of the Babylonian exile some 1000 years beforehand. It was a constant drumbeat ever afterwards; every true prophet saw it coming.

Modern critics immediately dismiss the possibility of prophetic foreknowledge because the rules of the academy forbid any and all supernatural explanations. As a result, they're forced to come up with increasingly contorted solutions for the Old Testament in its final form. Was every prophetic promise in the entire Old Testament really inserted centuries later by editors? How did they do so without completely destroying the literary structures of the individual books, as well as the narrative unity of the whole? Not to mention the challenges such editors faced back in the days before word-processors when every document was copied by hand.

Here's the point: if modern critics are right, then the Bible is nothing more than an anthropological record, and there's no more hope in Jesus than our current political heroes. But if God does exist, then couldn't he have warned his people beforehand about the Babylonian captivity? Couldn't those warnings be recorded in the Old Testament? And if Moses knew about it, is it so hard to believe that Isaiah did as well? Couldn't the unmistakable change in tone in Isaiah 40 be the result of God revealing to Isaiah the future after the exile, when he comforts the whole world through his Son? And if you're willing to have an open mind about this, then why not go all the way and allow for the possibility that Jesus could be the real answer to our cynicism? If God exists, then couldn't his Son Jesus deliver a different kind of comfort, one that lasts forever?

We've tried all the other avenues of comfort and found that, no matter how good in the moment, they all come up short. But what Isaiah begins to describe here and continuing all the way to the end is that when God's comfort comes, it comes to stay. So Isaiah goes on to say this:

Speak to Jerusalem's heart, and call to her, "Finished is your warfare." Isaiah 40:2a

In other words, what Jesus brings is what John Lennon loved to imagine, that war is over *forever*. Whereas God's people once knew no other way of life, believing that warfare was eternal, the advent of Jesus meant that God's people would be comforted with his *eternal* peace. No more

disappointment with failed political leaders. No more insecurity. No more bloodshed. Only peace, forever.

That's precisely what Jesus delivered. Scourged, humiliated, and nailed to a cross, he called out to all of God's people: "It is finished!" War is over, if you want it, war is over now.

JESUS COMFORTS US WITH GOD'S FORGIVENESS

The biggest challenge to faith is not believing that God exists, nor is it believing that he comforts his people. Rather, it's acknowledging our need of him. Which is to say that the big problem is not with God but with us. God's comfort makes us uncomfortable; it's a threat to our pride.

From the cross, Jesus speaks to Jerusalem and to us, saying, "It is finished." i.e. war is over, if you want it. But it takes real humility for men and women like us to admit our need.

Isaiah's announcement goes to the core of our need. He says:

... that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. Isaiah 40:2b

We couldn't comfort ourselves. What was broken in us had to be repaired by someone else. Not only were our sins pardoned by a higher authority, but in fact the Lord miraculously and lavishly paid off our debts. Through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the death penalty for all those who put their trust in him. Experiencing God's comfort means acknowledging our own sinfulness and our need for a savior, which makes us very uncomfortable.

The irony is that in our wildest fantasies we imagine the transformation of the world such that we're free from every grief and obstacle, but then when God offers this to us in Jesus, we tell him that our need isn't so bad. We want God's cosmic comfort in the form of a little invisible patch or a tiny back pillow, i.e. something insignificant and unnoticeable. But the reality is that God's comfort comes only through the death of his Son. Such a serious remedy requires admitting our own serious problem.

There are so many people over the centuries who have experienced God's comfort in Jesus. What they have in common is real humility, because that's what it takes to admit that you're a sinner and you need the comfort of God's forgiveness.

For example, Augustine lived in North Africa at the end of the 4th Century. His mother introduced him to Christianity as a young boy, but Augustine chose to go his own way. He vainly sought comfort through popularity, hedonism, sexual freedom, sophistication, and asceticism. It wasn't until he admitted his own sin and gave Jesus control of his life that he experienced God's forgiveness and eternal comfort.

Or take John Newton, the 18th Century English slave trader. Again, introduced to Jesus by his mother, he pursued adventure and wealth and fame on the high seas, until during a shipwreck he

made a foxhole conversion. But after God spared his life, he continued to live on his own terms for many years, making his living off of the slave trade. It wasn't until he came to terms with the weight of his sin and made Jesus Lord of his life that he enjoyed God's eternal comfort.

Everyone who comes to faith in Christ must take the same path. No more playing the victim. No more shifting blame. We should have been on that cross; not Him. But Jesus took our punishment so that we might be forgiven and be reconciled with God. There is no greater comfort than to be welcomed into the arms of our loving heavenly Father.

If you haven't yet put your faith in Jesus, won't you consider whether it's simply a matter of pride? It takes real humility to admit one's need for forgiveness in Christ. But ask any believer, and they'll tell you that God's comfort far outweighs the costs.

JESUS COMFORTS US WITH GOD'S GLORY

Isaiah goes on to describe God's comfort in three consecutive announcements. We'll look at the first one (vv 3-5) now, and then the second (vv 6-8) and third (vv 9-11) in subsequent weeks this Advent season.

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. Isa 40:3-4

The Gospels quote these lines to explain what John the Baptist was doing at the dawn of Jesus' ministry. As the last of the prophets, John came to prepare the way for the Lord, not in the holy city, but out in the wilderness. Why? Because that's where we live as exiles apart from God. The good news of Christmas is that Jesus came to find us there. He came to us in the wilderness, so that he might lead us home to a place of peace and safety.

Isaiah says that the road home through the wilderness is a rough one, through many valleys and over many mountains. It's going to take a tremendous amount of work to make it straight and flat and ready for the king. In fact, it's far more work than we can do on our own.

Perhaps you've heard that Rwanda is described as the Land of a Thousand Hills. At least half a dozen of them are found inside the grounds of the airport in Kigali. Yet they have a long, flat runway—large enough to land a Boeing 747. To build it, they had to slice off the tops of the hills and fill in all the valleys. This was no minor landscaping project, but a radical transformation.

That's not unlike what Isaiah envisioned would happen with the advent of Jesus. Whereas before it was hard work to go up to Jerusalem from the wilderness, with the coming of Christ everything would change. In particular, Isaiah is talking about going up to Jerusalem to worship. Back in the days of Solomon's Temple, God's presence there was represented by the famous glory cloud rising up from the Temple. When Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, this glory cloud was no longer to be seen. But Isaiah envisions a new day with the advent of Jesus:

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isa 40:5

When Jesus comes, Isaiah says, God’s glory will be revealed again, and this time all flesh shall see it. No longer obscured by mountains or valleys, no longer limited to one mountaintop in the Middle East. Rather, it will be for all nations, tribes and tongues. For everyone.

That’s exactly what has come to pass, as forgiveness of sins and eternal life is offered in Christ to all people, regardless of skin color or sexual history or language or political party. All of us can see and experience the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

So why is Jesus good news? In this message we’ve learned of the promise of God’s comfort with the advent of Jesus. Isaiah promised that Jesus would comfort us with God’s peace, God’s forgiveness and God’s glory. Can you believe it?

On Thanksgiving, my brother-in-law brought a special guest to dinner, and sharing our holiday meal with this man was a vivid reminder to me of what God has done for all of us who believe. I have so much admiration for my brother-in-law and his family, who have been caring for this same homeless man for about 3 years. They’ve served him countless meals, opened their home to him again and again, done his laundry dozens of times, given him rides all over town, etc. They’ve been gracious and generous, and also shown him a lot of tough love to try to get him to take responsibility for his own situation. I’m really impressed with their love and tenacity.

On Thanksgiving, my brother-in-law picked him up at the homeless shelter, brought him over to the house, and then seated him at the head of the table. Over dinner, it dawned on me that while the rest of the world may see this man in his current brokenness, my brother-in-law sees him with grace, i.e. by faith, not by sight. And that’s precisely how God must see you and me every Sunday when we gather around the Lord’s table. If Jesus hasn’t comforted us with God’s peace and forgiveness, then we aren’t welcome at his feast. If we’re not forgiven, then we come as a nuisance, because God doesn’t really want us there. He would rather have other company. But if in fact God’s comfort is really given to us in Christ, then the glory of the Lord is revealed in all of us as we take our place at the Lord’s table. We are welcome and we belong, forever.

The feast has only just begun. It will never, ever end. By faith, through the advent of Jesus, we will enjoy God’s comfort forever.