



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Comfort, Comfort My People

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV84)

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ 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. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." ⁹ 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!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ 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.

The book of Isaiah is unique when you consider the context. Isaiah is prophesying in the 8th century B.C. The nation of Israel has been divided in two for about 200 years. The 10 northern tribes take on the name Israel while the 2 southern tribes take on the name Judah. In 722 B.C., during Isaiah's ministry, the 10 northern tribes will meet their end by the hands of the Assyrian army. 20 years later, these same Assyrians will travel to Jerusalem, the capital of the southern tribes, of Judah, and stand poised to repeat history. Isaiah is there to assure the king that Jerusalem will not meet the same fate as the 10 northern tribes; Judah will be spared.

In his book, Isaiah preaches about events after, during, and even before they take place. During his ministry, he will prophesy some events that won't take place for about another 150 years. One of these events is concerning the people of Babylon, a nation of no real significance during Isaiah's lifetime. Babylon will rise up and conquer and destroy Jerusalem and exile the Jews from their homeland. Having already preached that message, we meet up in Isaiah's prophecies after he has foretold that event. He continues in his future prophecy now giving them God's Word after they will have had experienced this massive defeat by the Babylonians. It's kind of a preaching of days of future past kind of sermon, for people who at that time will need comfort.

The Jews most certainly needed the comfort. In the future as Isaiah foretold, they will have lost everything: their homes, their capital, their king, their entire homeland. When they reach this point in their history, it will have been well over a century since Isaiah told them that God would punish them in exactly this way because they did not turn to the Lord, because they continued to sin against him. The Jews knew that they were being rightly punished. They had this coming. In their grief over realizing the punishment foretold so long ago, they probably felt like, "We are ruined! God doesn't love us anymore! Why should he? We rebelled. We wouldn't listen. We didn't do as we were told."

Yet God simply says through Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people." Your hard service has been completed; the punishment has been carried out. Your sin has been paid for; I no longer hold them against you. You have received from the Lord's hand double for all your sins; I give you so much forgiveness that it pays for all your sins twice over.

What a thing for the Lord to give his people. Before they have even sinned, talking about the aftermath of their future sin, God is already holding out comfort for them for today as well as for the future. It is true that they in no way deserve this, but this is our God, and this is what he does.

As I picture these words of comfort, I immediately think of the child who has been disciplined. You may not even have yelled at them, but the kid in trouble begins sobbing at the very fact that they are being punished. Even though you are upset with what they did and you know that you are right to punish them, to discipline them, to correct their action for the future, you still have your heart strings pulled as you see the tears – the real tears – stream down their face.

You remember what that feel like, right? When you got in trouble, when your Mom or Dad raised their voice at you. They yell at me because they hate me. They punish me because they hate me. You failed them. You knew you deserved to be yelled at, punished, but you couldn't help but think, "I messed up! They don't love me anymore!"

Then the punishment is over, and you go to talk to the child. You've calmed down enough to tell them what they are being punished for, what you expect them to do to make up for what they have done (maybe in the form of an apology, cleaning up a mess, something like that), and how to behave in the future.

When the discipline is over, the timeout completed, you just want to tell them that they are forgiven and loved. You want to comfort them, hug them so that they know that you only disciplined them because it's what's best for them. You want to mold them for future behavior that is going to be beneficial for you and for them. Even in discipline, you love them and comfort them.

Have we ever felt like that child being disciplined by God like the Jews did, overwrought with sadness because I am being punished even though I know I deserve it? Doesn't that ring in our heads when things go bad? I get sick. The water heater stops working. The dishwasher leaks. I get into a car accident. My Mom is diagnosed with cancer. These things happen and I kind of get to thinking that maybe this is some sort of karma. I deserve to have these bad things happen to me. I did something wrong. This is my fault. This is because I forgot that birthday, because I was mean to Sally, because I don't give generously like I should. The reasons pile up, and we figure, "I deserve this because I messed up."

This is when God steps in, just like he did with the Jews before the whole destruction of Jerusalem happened, and assures us, "Your hard service has been completed. Your sin has been paid for. You have received from the Lord's hand double forgiveness for all your sins." Before the bad things pile up, before I blame myself, before I have even committed the sin, God is telling me, "Comfort, comfort, my people." You feel punished, but I have already forgiven you. Your sin is really removed. I am not holding this against you. Your future sins are already past and paid for. Come here to me. Let me gather you into my arms. Let me carry you close to my heart. Let me give you a hug, showing you that this has not affected my love for you. I will still gently lead you on.

Nowhere else is this comfort given other than through our God. He is the one who wants you to know exactly that all the punishment that your sin deserved has already been paid for. This comes from the God whose word stands forever, even while life falls apart and you blame yourself. If you feel punished by God, he tells you, "Comfort, comfort my people. Your hard service has been completed. Your sin has been paid for. You are forgiven." Amen.

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