

Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel...for Crooked Sinners

Isaiah 40:1-11 (NIV)

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 wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert 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 people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness 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 endures forever." ⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news 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 he rules with a mighty arm. 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.

When I say the word, "crooked," what comes to mind? Is it politicians or lawyers, professions that seemingly have a plethora of those who are shady and corrupt? Do you think of the scammers impersonating Amazon or Medicare or even a pastor in order to con you out of money? With crooked people, we see someone who's dishonest, someone who's not straight with you.

That's a big deal. If someone isn't transparent with you or you get the impression that they're not, then you feel like they're hiding something, that they have a hidden agenda with you. And you just wait for how they're going to cheat you, con you, wrong you. You can't trust a person like that, let alone embrace them or comfort them.

Dealing with crooked people is even worse when it comes to those who say that they are our brother or sister in Christ, a fellow Christian. They say things to trap you. They lie about you and spread rumors about you. And then they lie to your face when you call them out on it. They always have an excuse as to why it's not their fault. They're crooked, but you know that they are not supposed to be like that.

What do you do with such a crooked person? Do you set up boundaries and don't interact with them because you know that they will let you down, hurt you? Do you tolerate them and just recognize that nothing they tell you will be the truth, that you take everything they say with a grain of salt? Do you kind of naively and gullibly jump with both feet into the relationship every time hoping for a different outcome? Can you straighten them out?

Solomon was indeed wise when he wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:15, "What is crooked cannot be straightened." People sure do seem like a bent piece of metal that you are trying to straighten out. You might succeed in making it mostly straight, but you can still see all the bends and curves. It's never perfectly straight again. Kind of like all our righteous acts being like filthy rags that we heard last week. So, maybe these crooked people just deserve judgment, that they have to do something to make it up to me before I forgive them, before I interact with them, before I do anything for them.

Yet, are we perfectly straight or are we crooked, like the bent up metal wire? The situations I mentioned earlier, you may have been on the receiving end, but you also have found times when you are on the crooked end. You know the times when you have lied to others, when you have had a hidden agenda. You know when you have manipulated and twisted what happened to serve your image and your purposes. You have made promises and broken them. You have said things to trap people and indict them, judge them, condemn. You have said harsh words, damning words, to those who have tried to help you, who have tried to lead you back to God and his Word. It's a truth that I know about myself. As good as I want to be, I see my crooked acts, the crooked words I have said, and the crooked thoughts I have had. Can we be straightened out?

Thankfully, last week, God told us through the prophet Isaiah that we are not lost causes. Yes, we are all messed up and crooked. But God did not immediately rend the heavens and come down and judge us, obliterate us. No, he came to us, like he did for the crooked Israelites. They had the commands of God, promised that they would adhere to them, but they ignored them. They had the crooked practice of worshiping idols while at the same time bringing offerings to the temple. They had stubbornly refused to listen to God's Word. Even after Jerusalem was destroyed and the people exiled, the God's punishments and boundaries did not seem to straighten them out.

Yet this is how God comes to the crooked Israelites: “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.” (verses 1-2) God brings them double comfort! He shepherds us gently with such tender words that their sin has been doubly paid for so that we would have no doubt that it’s completely eradicated and done away with. How? As Isaiah would prophesy later, the servant of the Lord was pierced for their transgressions and crushed for their iniquities. The punishment that brought them peace was upon him. By his wounds they were healed. God paid the price. And not the bare minimum. He paid for all crooked ways of all people of all time. This is the recompense, the compensation for our sins, that accompanies him.

Why did he do this? Because it’s his will. He desired to take this on for crooked sinners, for us. He took the judgment on himself so that he wouldn’t have to take it out on us. He satisfied justice not by making people who sin against you or me pay us back, but by Jesus paying for their sin against us and paying for all the ways we have been crooked to others.

It is God’s actions for us that changes us, just as the voice here declares: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert 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.” (verses 3-4) God’s Word perfectly straightens out the crooked. God the Holy Spirit calls us to turn from our crooked ways, the times when we want to lie, the times when we want to manipulate people for our hidden agendas, the times when we are harsh to those who try to help us by turning us to God’s Word. Because he lived completely and perfectly straight in all his actions, all his dealings with people, never being deceptive, never taking a crooked path, we are straightened out with no kinks and no bends. The Emmanuel, the God with us, has changed us to now live holy and godly lives.

By the working of God, I have seen you change where crooked things have become straight. I’ve seen it in how you talk to your spouse, that instead of lying and manipulating and being crooked, you have spoken the truth in love, that you have worked on being transparent, on serving the other not because they deserve it but because Christ has served you. I have seen it as instead of keeping people away and waiting for them to reconcile with you and apologize for how they wronged you, you served them and were the hands and feet of Jesus, imitating the one who loved and served crooked people. Yes, you will make boundaries with some of these people, limits with how often and how you interact with them, when you will take their phone calls, if you will communicate via text, social media, email or not, whether or not you will go out to eat with them, but you change your words and actions not to retaliate or to perpetuate the hate but to show double comfort from the God who doubly paid for your sins and well as theirs.

Other people see it as well. Recently, a visitor told me that there’s something special about this church, that it was full of light, a joy to be here. I told them that’s because of the people. People are seeing your fruits of your faith, evidence that God has indeed straightened you and me out by the Emmanuel’s perfect life lived and given for us.

We live in a world of crooked people. Crooked ways still flash up in our lives, but God has come to be with us to straighten us out. He has done this with his perfect life lived for us and his death sacrificed on the cross. We show that he has changed us as we serve as Christ has served us, that we speak transparent truth in love for other people’s good, that we mimic our lives after Emmanuel’s holy and blameless life. Thank you, God, for straightening out us crooked sinners. Amen.