

The God Who Comforts

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-15a, & Mark 1:1-8
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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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 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.

2 Peter 3:8-15 (NIV)

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

¹⁴ So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. ¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation...

Mark 1:1-8 (NIV)

¹ The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" — ³ "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The God Who Comforts

A story came across my desk recently about a man who worked for the Post Office. This man's job was to process all the mail that had illegible addresses. One day, a letter came to his desk addressed in shaky handwriting to God. He thought he should open it to see what it was about. He opened it and read these words:

"Dear God, I am a 93-year-old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension check. Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited two of my friends over for dinner. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. Can you please help me? Sincerely, Edna."

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to his fellow workers. Each of them dug into their wallets and came up with a few dollars. By the time he made the rounds, he had collected \$96, which he put into an envelope and sent to the woman. The rest of the day, all of the workers felt a warm glow for the kind thing they had done.

Christmas came and went. A few days later another letter came from the old lady addressed to God. All of the workers gathered around while the letter was opened. It read: "Dear God, How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. We had a very nice day and I told my friends of your wonderful gift. By the way, there was \$4 missing. I think it must have been those thieves at the Post Office. Sincerely, Edna."

Well, the folks at the Post Office tried to help. Helping people is what life is all about, isn't it? Which brings us to one of the most beautiful passages in the Scriptures. From Isaiah 40:1-11 we heard Matt read this morning:

“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 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. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

Later in the same passage, Isaiah writes, “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!’

“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. 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.”

What wonderful words for this second Sunday in Advent. “Comfort my people.”

What was the occasion of Isaiah’s letter of comfort to the Israelites? In 587 BC the city of Jerusalem, the temple and the Jewish armies had all been destroyed by the Babylonian Army under Nebuchadnezzar. Ten thousand of Israel’s best citizens were marched off to Babylon in what is now modern day Iraq. Many of those left behind were imprisoned.

In the course of time, the exiles to Babylon married, built homes, had children and settled into their new land. They might as well accept Babylon as their new home. The prophet Jeremiah told them they would be there for 70 years. So they did the best they could in their new surroundings. Still, they were away from home and from the temple — away from everything that gave them their sense of identity. These were years of longing and mourning for what had been.

To make it even worse, the prophets made it unmistakably clear to the people that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength. They were, instead, a well-deserved punishment from God for the wickedness of the Hebrew people. It is in that context that Isaiah comes on the scene with this much welcomed message, “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 . . .”

Undoubtedly many of you, if you haven’t already, will be exposed in the next few weeks in one form or another to the music of Messiah. Perhaps you know the history of this splendid piece of music. In the summer of 1741, over the course of only twenty-four days, George Frederic Handel composed the music for Messiah. The lyrics, however, a combination of scripture texts from the King James Version of the Bible and The Book of Common Prayer, were compiled by Charles Jennens.

Here's what's important to us. The first words sung in Messiah are taken directly from this passage of Scripture. The tenor soloist sets the mood. He sings: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned . . ."

That was good news for the Jewish people who, at this point in time, were feeling God-forsaken. God has not forsaken them at all, says the prophet Isaiah.

GOD HAS FORGIVEN THEIR SINS AND HAS RECLAIMED THEM AS HIS OWN PEOPLE. WHAT GOOD NEWS THAT WAS FOR THEM AND WHAT GOOD NEWS THAT IS FOR ALL THOSE WHO SEEK TO BE GOD'S PEOPLE TODAY.

Argentine evangelist Luis Palau tells about a woman named Maria Benitez-Perez who confronted him one day. Maria had made an appointment under false pretenses, claiming that she wanted to interview for a job.

But as soon as she entered his office, Maria made her intent clear. She was the secretary to the Communist Party in Ecuador. She denounced everything having to do with God or with Jesus Christ. Her bitterness overwhelmed him. But Palau listened respectfully and replied gently to everything Maria said.

Soon, as Palau listened patiently with much love and concern, Maria began telling him her life story. It was a tale of pain and suffering and sin. And she ended it all with one question, "Supposing there is a God," she asked, "would He accept a woman like me?"

Palau did not hesitate. He turned in his Bible to Hebrews 10:17 and read aloud these words to Maria: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

Maria tried to explain once again all the sins she had committed. Palau countered again with Hebrews 10:17, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." Seventeen times Maria tried to explain why she was unworthy to receive forgiveness. Seventeen times, Luis Palau repeated these same words "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And finally, Maria Benitez-Perez, the secretary to the Communist Party in Ecuador, bowed her head and gave her life to Jesus Christ.

Maria Benitez-Perez was comforted by the words from Hebrews just as the people of Israel were comforted by the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . ."

Of course, this joyous message is not only for Maria and for the people of Israel. It is for all who have fallen short of the glory of God. That means it is a joyous message for all of us.

GOD DIDN'T FORGIVE ISRAEL BECAUSE THEY DESERVED TO BE FORGIVEN, OR BECAUSE HE REGARDED THEIR OFFENSES LIGHTLY. GOD FORGAVE THEM SIMPLY BECAUSE GOD LOVED THEM.

Do you know who Rachel Naomi Remen is? She is the Clinical Professor of Family and Community Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine. She is especially known for her work with cancer patients and is an outstanding writer.

In her book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, she tells about an event that changed her life forever. She writes that in the beginning of December the year she turned thirteen, her father declared bankruptcy. It was a devastating thing to happen to their family just before Christmas. The result was that the family that year made homemade Christmas presents for one another instead of exchanging store-bought gifts. Rachel knit a colorful muffler for her Dad, and, using copper wire, she made a bracelet for her Mom. In spite of their financial situation, Remen says, the morning of Christmas was as lively as it had always been — the presents, though they were homemade, were just as festive as ever.

Young Rachel ran her eyes over the gifts, and noticed that among them lay a small velvet box. Rachel knew that such a box was not likely to contain something homemade. She looked at it with suspicion.

While she looked and wondered what could be inside, she heard her father say to her, “Open it . . . it’s your Christmas present.” Rachel unwrapped the present and found in the small box a pair of twenty-four-karat gold earrings. To say she was surprised is an understatement. For some 2 minutes, she ran her eyes from her present to her dad. “Come on . . . put them on . . . they’re yours,” said her father. She ran straight into the bathroom, closed the door, and put them on her ears. Cautiously she looked into the mirror. Then something sad happened. All Rachel could see was how absurd those expensive earrings looked on her homely face.

With tears rushing down her cheeks, she headed straight to where she had left her father. “How could you do this?” she shrieked at her father. “Why are you making fun of me? Take them back. They look stupid. I’m too ugly to wear them. How could you waste all this money?” She flung the earrings to the floor and burst into tears.

All this while, her dad said nothing. Then he came to her, cuddled her in his arms and whispered, “I know they don’t look right now. I bought them because someday they will suit you perfectly.”

Rachel Naomi Remen writes, “I am truly grateful to have survived my adolescence. At some of its lowest moments, I would get out the box and look at the earrings. My father had spent a hundred dollars he did not have because he believed in the person I was becoming. It was something to hold on to.”

Young Rachel was comforted by those new earrings because they symbolized her father’s love for her. And, of course, that is the meaning of Christmas. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . .”

CHRIST CAME TO US NOT BECAUSE WE DESERVE IT, NOR BECAUSE HE APPROVES OF EVERYTHING WE ARE OR HAVE DONE. CHRIST CAME BECAUSE OF HIS FATHER'S GREAT LOVE FOR US.

Take a few moment this Christmas to listen again to the opening lines of Handel's Messiah. Listen as the tenor sets the mood: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned."

Then continue to listen as he sings, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness; prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Then listen as moves into a brief aria: "Ev'ry valley shall be exalted, and ev'ry mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain." Then you will hear the entire choir break into that glorious refrain: "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

What good news that is to all those who have ever needed to be forgiven. I believe too, friends, it's good news for you and for me.

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