

"Comfort Ye, My People"  
Isaiah 40:1-11  
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.  
Deer Creek Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity Presbyterian Church  
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Now that Advent has finally arrived, Rose and I have been busy preparing for the Christmas holidays in our home. Yesterday, we visited a local Christmas tree farm and cut down a Frasier fir for our living room in what has become an annual rite for us. Meanwhile, we're in the process of getting the boxes full of Christmas decorations down from the attic so we can begin sorting through them. Rose is the official decorator of our household—both inside and out--so she knows where everything should go with each in their proper place. As you can see, decorating for the holidays is a serious affair with us.

It's ALSO that time of year when I pull out my favorite Christmas music. For me, the season would not be complete without hearing many of those old holiday standards such as the Harry Simeon Chorale singing "The Little Drummer Boy," Bing Crosby crooning "White Christmas," Nat King Cole with "The Christmas Song," and Judy Garland's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" from the 1944 movie "Meet Me in St. Louis." Of course, near the TOP of my list are my CDs of Handel's *Messiah*. That symphonic masterpiece opens with an overture after which the tenor begins singing ever so softly and slowly:

*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. 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.*

The music then starts to build in intensity as he now sings:

*Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain.*

And then comes a mighty crescendo as the entire chorus erupts with:

*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.*

Believe me, hearing that opening movement with those reassuring words from Isaiah 40, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God" does more to help me get into the Christmas spirit than any visit from SANTA ever could. To begin with, these weren't the words of the prophet but of GOD telling Isaiah what message he must bring to Israel. And God didn't just say it once but he REPEATED it so that Isaiah would know in no uncertain terms what his word to his people was: "Comfort them. Offer them COMFORT, Isaiah!"

And if ever a people NEEDED comfort, it was certainly Israel who felt lost and far from God. They'd spent the last 70 years in exile in Babylon while Jerusalem, their Holy City, was destroyed so that no two stones stood on top of one another. A whole new generation of Jews had grown up never knowing their homeland and, as Ezekiel pictured them, they'd been reduced

to a valley of dry bones. BECAUSE their fathers and forefathers had been so wicked, God punished them by making them slaves once again in a strange land. This caused them to wonder if God had forgotten them or perhaps had ABANDONED them for good.

But ONCE AGAIN, God showed them mercy. He instructed Isaiah to regenerate their faith and revive their hope with his word of promise. What we have here in these lines is God's vision of hope for his people. Chapters 40 through 66 of Isaiah constitute what is commonly called the "Book of Consolation" and the first eleven verses, our Old Testament lesson, serve as its prologue. But God's promise of comfort is not merely to SOOTHE them. The Hebrew word for "comfort" does not mean "to hold one's hand," but "to MAKE STRONG; to INVIGORATE; to MAKE ALIVE again" and this is what God is pledging to do here- to turn that valley of dead bones into a valley teeming with life and abundance once again.

In the first two verses of our text, the prophet is told to announce that Israel's period of harsh discipline is over and God has forgiven them:

*"Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.*

Israel's sin which had caused her to be taken into exile in the FIRST place was now forgiven. If the Jews are to ever be revived, their FIRST need is to be restored back in relation to their God.

In vv. 3-5, we read those familiar words which were later used to describe the ministry of John the Baptist:

*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.  
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all flesh shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

The straightening and leveling out of highways referred back to the day when Eastern monarchs traveled through their kingdoms in slow, crudely built chariots. Because there were no paved roads in sixth-century B.C., workers were sent out to level the hills and build up the ditches and fill in the potholes so that the royal chariot might get to its destination as smoothly and as quickly as possible. In LIKE manner, the exiles were to begin preparing their hearts to receive their God whose desire is to LOVE them and HEAL them as fast as HE can.

With vv. 6-8, the prophet writes:

*A voice says, "Cry!"  
And I said, "What shall I cry?"*

*"All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
Surely the people is grass.  
The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."*

God commands Isaiah to declare that as it is his breath that CREATES human life, so can his breath EXTINGUISH it. But where everything in creation must eventually succumb to death and decay, the word of God endures FOREVER. And BECAUSE it IS God's word, it CAN be trusted and relied upon.

In vv. 9-10, Israel is commanded to return to Mt. Zion, the city of Jerusalem, and climb on top its highest hill so that when she proclaims the good news, her voice will carry STILL FURTHER.

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,  
lift if up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"  
Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.*

Israel is to SHOUT her message at the top of her voice- "BEHOLD your God!" Then those who are weary will know that their covenant with God is alive and that he still cares for them.

Finally, with v. 11, we are told that God will lead his exiles home as the shepherd leads forth his sheep:

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd,  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young.*

Jehovah is not only a god of POWER, he is also a god of COMPASSION who exercises a special love and tenderness for his people. God is coming to them as a shepherd seeking his lost sheep that he might bring them all safely home once again.

One seminary instructor used to remind his students, "When you are uncertain on what subject to preach, as you will often be, you cannot be wrong in following the line indicated by the prophet's cry, 'Comfort ye my people, saith your God.' Therefore, speak comfortably." However, we mustn't confuse the "comfort" promised by God with a simple "peace of mind." Go to any Barnes & Noble bookstore and the fastest growing division will be the "self-help" section with its aisles of "peace of mind" literature. In 1946, an entire industry rose up almost over-night when an eminent rabbi named Joshua Loth Liebman wrote *Peace of Mind*. Three years later, Catholic Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen published his book *Peace of Soul* and this was soon followed by *The Power of Positive Thinking* written by a Protestant minister named Norman Vincent Peale- all bestsellers which STILL command strong sales after all these years. In the 1960s and 70s, Robert Schuller made "possibility thinking" a national catchphrase and people have been turning their "scars into stars" ever since.

Some years ago, there was an advertisement in the literary supplement of the Sunday

*New York Times* which proclaimed in bold, black type, "NOW YOU CAN HAVE PEACE OF MIND IN TEN MINUTES!" This merger of religion and popular psychology has often led to a distortion of the TRUE Christian message. People are drawn to it seeking a comfort and serenity which they hope will be real and lasting when in fact there ARE no short cuts or quick fixes to life's complex problems. Today, the most popular preachers continue to be those who offer the soothing prescription that God wants to reward you with health, wealth, and happiness and that peace of mind is only a simple prayer away. Rarely do they have anything to offer either in their sermons, lectures, or books that would deal with such intractable problems as war and poverty, hunger and disease- the world as it ALWAYS WAS and as we CURRENTLY find ourselves in.

If we can just put aside all the Christmas nostalgia along with all their soothing sounds and sweet emotions for one brief minute and look at the world as it is presently constituted, it's not a very pretty or hopeful picture, IS it. Here on the home front, healthcare costs continue to soar along with the price of gas and groceries with little indication that they'll be coming down anytime soon. Young people are afraid that with housing costs going through the roof, they'll be unable to afford their very first home. America is more divided than it's ever been with many on both sides of the political aisle viewing the other, no longer as just friendly rivals but with outright suspicion and EVEN CONTEMPT. Earlier this year, the Surgeon General of the United States released a report that describes our nation as currently suffering from an epidemic of loneliness. It goes so far as to blame much of the new technology and social media, originally created to connect people with one another, for EXACERBATING the problem and leaving them emptier and more alone THAN EVER.

On the international scene, the world at-large continues to be a more anxious and unstable place. In retaliation for the 1400 Israeli deaths suffered at the hands of Hamas a little over a year ago, Israel retaliated by leveling much of Gaza and killing 35,000 persons in the process, 70% of whom are either CHILDREN or the ELDERLY. After putting up a valiant defense of their homeland for the past two and a half years, Ukraine is now showing signs of utter exhaustion with hope and morale in that country at an all-time low. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin is threatening to unleash nuclear missiles upon the West for all the military support we've provided them. This, in turn, has led NATO leaders to warn their host nations to begin preparing for the possibility of World War III breaking out. No matter how many times we sing Jingle Bells or dream of a white Christmas, the problems seem intractable and WON'T GO AWAY.

Well as ridiculous as it might seem on the face of it, GOD'S prescription for his people, for all their hopelessness and despair, lay right here in Isaiah 40, in his promise that not only would they return to their homeland, but that he--as their God--would return to THEM and re-establish his covenant with them. Of course, you may cynically observe "but what good is a promise" when one finds oneself in tough straits, when it seems the bottom has fallen out of one's life and there's nothing left to cling to? How is a vow or a pledge made over 2500 years ago going to help me TODAY when my health is broken, my heart is crushed, and my future is barren? I don't need WORDS- I need something CONCRETE! I need REAL ACTION!

Well, what makes Isaiah 40 an ADVENT text is that true to his word, God DID act, God DID deliver his people from the hands of the Babylonians and restore them back to their homeland. But even MORE impressively, God came personally to our world in the form of his son--Jesus Christ--to offer us an EVEN GREATER deliverance. In that infant, God took upon

himself the form and substance of his creation, the Creator becoming ONE with the creature. He came to deliver us from all our guilt and fear, from all the hopelessness and despair that has marked our age and robbed us of HIS joy for us. Thus, God has demonstrated once and for all how much he LOVES us- by saving us from our sin and reconciling us to himself, by flooding us with his peace and filling our world with his personal presence. It doesn't mean that all our problems are suddenly over, that we'll now receive that healing we've been praying for or that our financial woes will now be gone or our marriages miraculously saved. It DOES mean, however, that our God promises to stand with us, that he will be by our side regardless of any of life's obstacles to make the path easier for us. He promises that in HIM, along with the love and support of our brothers and sisters in the church, we shall find all the strength and support we will ever need to overcome what may and DO so with real joy and a genuine peace in our hearts.

But God was NOT YET finished offering comfort to his people. After almost four years of training and close companionship with Jesus, John--the youngest disciple and author of the fourth Gospel--records what is referred to as Jesus' Farewell Address in the hours shortly before his arrest. Our Lord is fully aware that the disciples are afraid, that they sense something climactic is about to occur. Fearful at the thought that their leader might be taken from them, Jesus' final words are intended to bolster their faith and undergird their courage for the days ahead. He does so by imparting to them a PROMISE, a WORD OF HOPE intended to galvanize their faith and fortify their spirits in preparation for the tests and trials that yet await THEM. He promises them a "COMFORTER"--the Holy Spirit, HIS OWN PERSONAL PRESENCE--who will shortly descend upon them and remain with them throughout the rest of their lives and ministry. Even though Jesus will be physically gone, he will continue to be SPIRITUALLY present and alive to them; he will become more intimate to them by making their hearts his new home. Wherever they go and whatever they encounter, they can take hope in knowing he will always be present both WITH them and FOR them. They will never again have any cause to despair, even when confronted with the prospects of their OWN arrest and death for from then on, NOT EVEN DEATH will ever be able separate them from either his presence or his love.

Well true to his word, on the day of Pentecost, his followers DID receive his Spirit, his own personal presence, and from that day forward, they went on to "turn the world upside down" as they were described in the book of Acts- filling the world with God's love and hope just as he had done FOR THEM. Well, WE--as children of God--are inheritors of that SAME SPIRIT AND MESSAGE which those disciples possessed. This morning, we find ourselves equipped with that SAME hope, that SAME faith, and that SAME love that THEY had and as a result, such destructive passions as fear and guilt and loneliness and despair do NOT have to rule our thoughts and govern our attitudes as they do so many OTHERS. We see that with the birth of Jesus in that manger and later, with the outpouring of his Spirit upon his followers at Pentecost, God proves once and for all to the world that his word CAN BE TRUSTED, that his promise of comfort is not some vain utterance or empty hope but a reality we can base our very lives upon. And if we "KNOW THAT WE KNOW THAT WE KNOW" that we CAN trust God to be true to his word, then WE TOO will discover that SAME comfort and enjoy that SAME peace which enabled those Israelites to thrive in a strange land and allowed those early disciples to confidently "turn the world upside down." So too will WE be able to confront any worry and surmount any problem with a "PEACE OF HEART" rather than a "peace of mind" and THAT will prove to be the GREATEST CONSOLATION you or I will ever need. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, Christmas is not always a fun time; it does not always fill us with peace and love, with joy and goodwill. We hurt inside with anger we've continued to stoke, with disappointments we've never allowed to forgive ourselves from, and with fears that fills us with jealousy and suspicion toward one another. That is not how you would have us live our lives. Throughout this season of Advent, help us to see beyond all the glitter and tinsel and bright colors to behold the REAL reason for the season, that with the birth of your Son comes the promise of PERSONAL rebirth and the opportunity for NEW BEGINNINGS. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*