

Cross-Words: Comfort, Hope

Isaiah 40:1-11

Advent Mid-Week Two

December 7, 2016

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. 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." 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 on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it 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. He will tend 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.

Tonight's reading from Isaiah was great news to the Israelites, who had disobeyed God and who could see the dismal reality of their punishment. This passage is also good news for us, who have disobeyed God and need to hear a word of comfort and hope. Furthermore, this text challenges us to share the comfort and hope we have received from God with the rest of the world.

Tonight, Isaiah takes us another step closer to Bethlehem. The words you just heard are a call to acknowledge what God has done for us, and news that good is too good to keep to ourselves. Bethlehem's message includes the comfort and hope Jesus won for us on Calvary. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, "The manger is situated on Golgotha and the cross has been raised in Bethlehem.

Consider the first two verses of the reading: *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* (Is 40:1-2 ESV).

To understand the comfort and hope that the Israelites found in these words, we must go back to the sixth chapter of Isaiah. There we find the full extent of God's anger over his people's unfaithfulness: *[God] said, "Go, and say to this people: " 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."* (Is 6:9-10 ESV).

Isaiah responded by asking God how long this curse would be on the people, and God said: *Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land* (Is 6:11-12 ESV).

Knowing the depth of God's anger over the people's sin makes it easy to understand why the people received Isaiah's message from God with great joy. The Israelites had received a double punishment for all their sins, and now are told they will receive that much and more of God's love and forgiveness.

The joy that the words of Isaiah brought to the Israelites is also our joy. Our sins have been paid for, too. We have been bought at a great price by the blood of Jesus. The payment that Christ made for us is worth more than double for our sins because Christ paid the price for the sin of the whole world.

Our hard service is over, too. We have been set free from the bondage and exile of sin. We have been rescued from the weight of the Law. We live in the joy of the forgiveness of the Gospel. That's why we have comfort and hope.

In verses 3-11, we are honored to sit with Isaiah and listen as God lays out his plan for his people's future. God has not only decided to comfort his people with his forgiveness, but he also plans to go to them personally and reveal himself to them in a most intimate way.

Isaiah hears a voice announce: *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* (Is 40:3-5 ESV).

God, himself, is coming. When he comes, all humanity will see his glory revealed. We are to be instruments of that revelation. We are called to proclaim that the faithfulness of God overcomes the fickleness of man.

Isaiah hears another voice: *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 on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever* (Is 40:6-8 ESV).

People are fickle. People are disobedient. Why should we proclaim the comfort and hope of God to them? Because God's word stands forever. The word of God has not changed from Isaiah, to Jesus, to us. We are called to announce the truth of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection because that is the true message of Christmas.

God has called us to take his truth to our fickle generation before the hot wind of his wrath

blows. This generation is dying to hear the Good News of Salvation. Christ is the comfort and hope that this world is looking for but they will never hear the message if we are not crying out, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

The call to share our faith brings us closer to Bethlehem, but it's not an easy task, even at Christmas. God told Isaiah to: *go up on a high mountain ... lift up your voice with a shout* (Is 40:9 (NIV)). The comfort and hope of Christmas are wonderful for us, but it's critical that they be shared. We must look around for high mountains. We must scan the horizon for opportunities to share the message.

The word that Isaiah hears is the same word the prophet Zechariah heard: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey* (Zec 9:9 ESV).

It's the same word the angel announced to Joseph: *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us)* (Mt 1:23 ESV).

It's the same word the psalmist declared in hymns of praise: *Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him* (Ps 98:1 ESV).

This is the word we are called to proclaim at this Christmastime. Our God comes as a mighty warrior to defeat his enemies and defend his people. He also comes as a gentle shepherd to comfort those who are his own. Our response to that is a mountaintop cry, "Joy to the world! The Lord has come!"

Tonight, our Lord is asking us to go up on the mountaintop. He is asking us to proclaim the comfort and hope that are ours at Christmas. If we take the step to reach out and touch people as we have been touched by Jesus, we will begin to see Bethlehem's manger with greater clarity. Sharing God's comfort and hope with others will deepen the comfort and hope God has given to us.