

COMFORT FOR THE AFFLICTED

Isaiah 40:1-11

Second Sunday in Advent (Series B)

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The Old Testament lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent comes from *The Prophet Isaiah*, chapter 40, verses 1 through 11. In this Old Testament lesson, Isaiah teaches the afflicted soul where to find comfort. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Isaiah 40, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

- 1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
- 2 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.
- 3 A voice cries:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 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.
- 5 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
- 6 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.
- 7 The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
- 8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.
- 9 Go on 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!"

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- 10 Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
- 11 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.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the day is “comfort.”

I like comfort. I think everyone does. Whoever invented padded pews is a hero. I grew up with those hard wooden pews. They made you want to stand up for the Scripture readings, and they made sure you didn't fall asleep during the sermon. Then we got those pads that go on top of them. This was a bit more comfortable, but if you slouched too much they could slip off the pew. They provided a certain degree of comfort, while also keeping you accountable during the sermon. If you fell asleep, you would end up on the floor, and everyone would know why. This is actually how the Pentecostal movement got started. Someone fell asleep, ended up on the floor, and decided to just roll with it. Then came the fully-integrated padded pew, with enough padding to be comfortable and enough friction to keep you off the floor. You might be more likely to fall asleep, but that's why God gave women sharp elbows. Somewhat seriously, though, it is actually easier to listen when you're comfortable. If you're joining us on the livestream, you probably find a comfy chair to settle into. It helps you pay attention, and that's good.

I like comfort. I think it's one of my main goals in life. I'm not saying it should be. It's really a selfish goal. But I am very much inclined toward comfort. I try to stay out of serious conflicts. I work really hard to foresee and prevent anything that might be uncomfortable. Whenever I do find myself in a painful or difficult situation—something I have no choice but to endure—I think to myself, “What do I have to do to make sure this never happens again?” I want a comfortable life, and it's probably one of my top priorities.

Comfort is good. This is obvious from verse 1: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (40:1). God wants us to be comfortable. But if you're quoting me, don't stop there, because I need to qualify that statement. God wants us to be comfortable. But when we are left to our own devices, we find comfort in the wrong things. And I'm not really talking about padded pews.

I've heard it said, and you've maybe heard this too, that we can get too comfortable. I think that's basically true, but it might help to put a finer point on it. The problem isn't really the level of comfort; it's what we take comfort in. You can never really be too comfortable in the mercy of God or the love of God or the grace of God or forgiveness in Jesus Christ. When it comes to the gifts of God, we can never be too comfortable in them. God assures us of these gifts, and he wants us to find complete comfort in them. The problem is when we start to find comfort in other things. We find comfort in our bank account, our possessions, a pantry full of food, our jobs, our good works, all sorts of other things, and even in our sins. The problem isn't necessarily that we become too comfortable, but when we are left to our own devices, we get too comfortable in the wrong things.

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God's will is that we would take comfort in the right things. He desires that we would find comfort in the things that will last forever. If we find comfort in this world, or in our possessions, or in our own abilities, or even in our sin, these things will inevitably fail us, and the comfort we enjoyed in this life will give way to eternal torment. That would be beyond uncomfortable. God's merciful will is to spare us from this disaster. So he afflicts us to break us out of the bad kind of comfort. Sometimes he may afflict us materially or physically. He certainly did this with the Israelites. But, most especially, he afflicts us spiritually, in our consciences, so that we despair even of our good works, and become uncomfortable in our sin. Then we find comfort in the things of God: his mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. These comforts will endure for all eternity.

So God afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. He does this, primarily, through his Word. And the two great doctrines of the Word are Law and Gospel. The Law is given to afflict the heart that is comfortable in sin or in the things of this world. And the Gospel comforts the heart afflicted by the Law.

We see this in the ministries of both Isaiah and John the Baptist. They afflicted the comfortable and comforted the afflicted.

The text we heard from Isaiah is pure comfort. But that wasn't the only message Isaiah proclaimed. And we only have to look back a couple verses to the end of chapter 39. "Comfort, comfort" comes immediately after Isaiah prophesied Judah's exile to Babylon. That was the affliction.

I'll give you a little history to help us get our bearings. The year is about 712 BC. Hezekiah is king of Judah. That's the southern kingdom of Israel. The capital city is Jerusalem. Assyria is the big power in the Middle East. They have already destroyed and dispersed the northern kingdom of Israel, and they tried to do the same to Judah, but God protected them (Is. 36-37). Jerusalem was spared. Then some ambassadors came from a different country, Babylon (Is. 39). Babylon was nothing scary at this time. So King Hezekiah didn't hesitate to show them all of his wealth—silver and gold and all sorts of expensive treasures. Big, bad Assyria had failed to conquer Jerusalem, so Hezekiah wasn't concerned about puny little Babylon. But right after Hezekiah showed the Babylonians all his treasure, Isaiah prophesied to him that all of it would be carried off to Babylon, along with many of his own descendants. Remember, Babylon wasn't powerful yet, so this would be like prophesying that Canada is going to become a world power and plunder the wealth of Norway. It doesn't sound very likely.

But sure enough, about a hundred years later, Babylon became the dominant power in the Middle East. In 612 BC they defeated Assyria, and in 605 they began to harass Judah. Then in 586 BC, they carried off all of Judah's treasures, whatever descendants Hezekiah had left, and the rest of the wealthy class of Judah. Isaiah's unlikely prophecy came to pass.

This was God's judgment, or affliction, on Judah. Hezekiah, though he was an otherwise righteous king, was proud of his wealth, and most of the kings who followed him were quite wicked. So God used Babylon to afflict them, and Isaiah prophesied it a hundred years beforehand.

But Isaiah is more well-known for his prophecies of comfort. Immediately after the prophecy of affliction, comes this: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." This marks a real turning point in the book, where Isaiah turns to the restoration of Judah. Long before the Babylonian captivity even started, Isaiah was already prophesying restoration. That's what we hear in chapter 40.

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“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” (40:2).

God doesn’t want Judah to think that he has abandoned them. It’s a momentary affliction for their good, so God assures them of his mercy. It’s like a parent saying to their disobedient child, “I still love you, and we’ll have some ice cream later, but right now you need a time out.” There’s a reason for the discipline, and the love doesn’t stop.

The thing that puzzled me for a long time about this verse was the last part, “that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” What is Isaiah saying? That God punished Jerusalem twice as bad as she deserved, and now that she’s suffered that much she can go home? That doesn’t sound quite right. But that’s not what the prophet is saying. He’s really saying something far more surprising. He’s talking about her receiving *double grace* for all her sins, not double punishment. This parallels the double comfort in verse 1. And it’s consistent with the imagery of the LORD’s hand. The LORD stretches forth his hand to give, not to punish. Think of a master putting his hand out to his dog to give him a treat. God stretches forth his hand in grace. When God comes in judgment, Scripture speaks of God’s mighty arm, or his bow, or turning his face away. His hand is an image of grace. Isaiah is saying that where Jerusalem deserved to be punished, far more than she actually was, God instead stretched forth his hand of grace. She has received double *grace* for all her sins. The double grace is that God delivered Judah from captivity, and the grace would continue beyond that.

He restored them through the Persian King Cyrus. And Isaiah even names Cyrus by name in chapter 45 (v. 1). This is a hundred and some years before Cyrus was even born. But, sure enough, the domination of Babylon in the Middle East is short lived. By 550 BC, just sixty years after Babylon rose to power, the kingdom of Persia began to eclipse Babylon, and in 538 BC, Cyrus decreed that the Israelites could return to Jerusalem. God was gracious and delivered Judah. That’s one thing.

But God’s grace extends far beyond that. Isaiah prophesies that the LORD himself will come to his people. Cyrus will not be their ultimate deliverer. The LORD will come to deliver his people.

“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’ ” (40:3-5).

The voice Isaiah prophesied of is John the Baptist (Mark 1:2-3). John was a baptizer and a preacher (Mark 1:4). He kind of has a reputation for being a fire and brimstone preacher. And he was, but so was every other good preacher in the Bible. The prophets, the apostles, even Jesus,

they were all just as harsh as John, if not even harsher sometimes. The best way to describe John's preaching was that he preached Law and Gospel. He afflicted those who were comfortable with their sin or in the treasures of the world. And he comforted those who were afflicted by sin or the accusation of the Law. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees a "brood of vipers" (Matt. 3:7), because they refused to repent. But he baptized those who confessed their sins. And they were forgiven. Mark calls his baptism "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This, by the way, is a really significant verse for the doctrine of baptism. Even before Jesus began baptizing or commissioned his disciples to baptize or sent the Holy Spirit, John's baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And if John's baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins, Jesus' certainly doesn't do less. It does more by also granting us the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38). Our baptisms into Jesus Christ also work repentance and forgive our sins.

John was the voice in the wilderness. He was preparing the way for the LORD himself to come to his people. He was leveling the terrain among the people of Israel. He was afflicting those who were proud, and he was comforting the humble. That's what Isaiah means when he talks about the valleys being lifted up and the mountains being made low. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; Prov. 3:34).

God has not changed from then until now. He did not change from Isaiah to John. And he has not changed from John to now. God still brings the proud low, and he still lifts up the humble. He still afflicts those who are comfortable in their sin. He afflicts those who find comfort in their own righteousness. He afflicts those who find comfort in the pleasures of this life. He afflicts us so that we will find comfort in the only thing that will really last: Jesus Christ.

The things of this world fade. We even fade. Isaiah compares us to the grass and the flowers of the field (40:6). Oh, isn't that nice? Not really. Grassy meadows and flowery fields look nice for a time. But grass withers and flowers fade when the breath of the LORD blows on them (40:7). Every comfort we find for ourselves will fail us, because we won't even endure. Suppose you find a comfy couch with a five hundred year warranty. You know what you've got? A comfy couch for someone else when you're dead. What then will last? Isaiah says, "But the Word of our God will stand forever" (40:8). That means that God's promises will endure for all eternity. Whatever he has declared to us, that will come to pass forever. His Word will not fail. So the only place to find lasting comfort is in his Word.

The great eternal hope Isaiah declares is the promise that the LORD, himself will come. And he did come in the flesh of Jesus Christ. He assumed flesh like ours. That is, our withering flesh. And in that withering flesh, he also assumed our sin. He suffered the cross. He suffered the wrath of God. Talk about uncomfortable. This was the height of all affliction. And he endured it to bring us comfort, not the trivial comfort of padded pews, but the eternal comfort of having peace with God. It's the comfort that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. It's the comfort that our withering flesh will not stay dead forever, but will be raised again at Christ's Second Coming.

Comfort, comfort. Your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. Where we all deserve God's wrath, instead we receive grace upon grace from the LORD's hand. This is all on account of Jesus, our Lord and Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.