

The Comfort of Christmas 2017

Welcome to Advent 2017. I love turning our focus to the miracle of the incarnation and our hearts to the anticipation of Christ's birth. The message of Christmas is a message of hope and peace. It is good news for all of us. I know Christmas itself, the American holiday, can be stressful and for some it is a depressing time. That's why I want to share this message with you this morning, because there is comfort in the message of Christmas.

Go back with me long before the birth of Jesus, to the words of the prophet Isaiah. If you are familiar with Handel's Messiah, you recognize the passage of Scripture that begins with these words in the King James version: **“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: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” Isaiah 40:1-2.**

NIV reads, **“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.” Isaiah 40:1-2.**

That's good news. God wants us to be comforted. In fact the bible speaks of God as “...the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles...so we can comfort others with the comfort we have received.” 2 Corinthians 1:3.

If you've ever been inconsolable, hurting so deeply there was nothing that could reach your pain, you were beyond comfort, then this message is for you. The God of all comfort has come to us. How does he comfort us? Isaiah tells us it begins here...

He comforts us with forgiveness and pardon. Verse 2 declares he has pardoned our iniquity. Our sins have been paid for. I want you to see the context of this passage. Isaiah has just finished telling King Hezekiah and the people of Judah that judgment is coming. They have been spared from the Assyrians, but they will not escape being exiled into Babylon. Jerusalem will fall because of their sin and rebellion against the Lord. He speaks of warfare and hard service. But now, beginning in chapter 40, God does not leave them without hope. Instead, he speaks of a time when he will come to them and save them – a time of deliverance and

restoration that would end their exile – a time of comfort and hope.

So God tells Isaiah to comfort them. Speak tenderly, speak comfortably to Jerusalem. Again, this is referring to a future time for Judah. They will go through judgment and exile, but God says “Tell them there is hope. I’ll restore them. Tell them the dark days are only for a season. I haven’t forgotten them and you can start by letting them know, I forgive them. Their sin has been paid for. Their iniquity has been pardoned.”

They were carried into exile because of their sin, but from the Lord’s hand, salvation comes. As Isaiah develops this through the coming chapters it becomes apparent to what he is referring. The “hard service” – the “warfare that is accomplished” – is referring to the exile in Babylon but the payment for their sins is referring to the sacrifice of Christ described in Isaiah 52-53. Jesus is the one who was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, the one upon whom was laid the iniquities of us all.

The message of Christmas is a message of comfort - a message of forgiveness and abundant pardon. You don’t have to die hopeless in your sins and go to hell. Instead, there is good news: a Savior is born in Bethlehem. Jesus has come to bear the penalty for your sins so you could be declared forgiven, clean, righteous. The Bible says **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21.**

What comfort. I’m free! No longer bound by sin and guilt and shame. The weight of sin is lifted. I am free from the sentence of death that hung over me. Do you hear me? Our sins are forgiven, our iniquity pardoned, our debt has been canceled, our record has been expunged. God doesn’t hold our sins against us any longer. And this good news is for everyone. The invitation is given to all who will receive him as savior. If you will confess that you are a sinner and ask Jesus to forgive you and save you, He will. Then you will receive his full pardon and you’ll know the comfort and peace his pardon will bring.

Look what else he does to comfort us. **He comforts us with deliverance.** Verse 3 says, **“A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness 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 mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 40:3-5.

“Make straight in the wilderness a highway.” This is not a command for people to get out into the desert and start road construction, blasting through mountains and filling in the valleys. How do we know that? Because the Lord says he will do this. **“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them: I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.” Isaiah 42:16.**

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland... I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland to give drink to my people...” Isaiah 43:19-20.

God has promised to make a way for us where there seems to be no way. Preparing the way for the Lord is referring to the practice of constructing processional ways for visiting dignitaries.

The Lord has prepared a way and declares this way will be straight, level and free of obstacles. It means he is coming to help us and **God will arrive without fail, He will travel without difficulty and He won't be delayed by hindrances.**

Be comforted in this - the Lord sent One on ahead, a Comforter, one that has prepared a way through the desert - a highway in the middle of the wilderness - and God is coming down that highway to deliver you out of exile and fear and sickness and depression and bondage. You don't have to clear the way, the Lord has made a way to deliver us. It is a direct path to you in your trouble. His deliverance won't be slowed down, he won't be hindered. He may not be early, but he won't be late. He'll be right on time.

Isaiah says there is a voice crying in the desert, “Get ready, get ready, get ready! Deliverance is coming.” How do we know deliverance is coming? Because The Deliverer is coming. He's on his way! Get ready. You're going to see his glory manifested.

Listen. It was about a thirty day walk from Babylon to Jerusalem. It was a long journey filled with peril then, just as it is today. The ruler of Babylon was not ready to let them go. It may have sounded impossible, unlikely, but when God says you're going to be free – start

packing your bags, get the kid's stuff together, get ready – you are going to be free! No one's going to delay you. No power can hinder you. Valleys can't slow you down and mountains can't block your path. God will raise the valleys up and bring the mountains down. The rough ground becomes level, the crooked places become straight, and the rugged places where you've been bogged down and stuck in the sand, they become a smooth, level plain.

Be comforted. Your days of being exiled in hopelessness are coming to an end. Be comforted. Your days in the desert of depression and despair are about to be over. The wilderness wandering is just about finished. God is going to put you on the super highway of deliverance and bring you out! Get ready.

And look at this: **“And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”** The glory of the Lord is referring to the Lord's presence. His presence will be revealed and all mankind will see it.

Be comforted. Deliverance is coming because the Deliverer is coming, unhindered by mountains or obstacles. And your deliverance won't be done in secret. Everyone will see it and know about it. How do I know? Because the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. It will be done!

If you feel alone and forsaken, wandering in the desert, in your own exile, suffering in the heat of the day, be comforted. Trust in the Lord. He will lead you out of your bondage and into his glorious presence. Hear that voice crying in the desert - “Get ready. Get prepared.” What comfort in knowing the Deliverer is on his way. He will comfort you.

He will comfort you with his Word. Look at verse 6. “A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’” The Lord says, “All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.” God is reminding them of their mortality, that to trust in riches or in themselves is foolish because everything we have is temporary; it is fleeting and passing. There is no comfort to be found in yourself, in your own strength or wisdom or your best laid plans. That's what got you into the mess you are in to begin with.

In what then do we put our trust? Isaiah reminds us that even though we are mortal and everything is withering and dying like the grass, yet **“...the word of our God stands forever.”** **Isaiah 40:8.** Here is where our trust belongs. In something and someone that is trustworthy. Trust in the Lord and in his unchanging word. If he said it, you can believe it, you can live by it,

you can rely upon it. It is truth! In a world where everything is shifting and changing, what a comfort to know God's word stands forever.

Imagine the prophet standing in the desert as the wind blows, changing the way things look in a matter minutes. "Everything is different, so what do I depend on?" Depend on God's word that stands forever. "Comfort my people. Your sins have been pardoned, a way of deliverance has been provided, and you can stand on God's word because it stands forever!"

Not only will he comfort you with his word, **He will comfort you with his presence.** Look at verse 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!'"** Isaiah 40:9.

"You who bring good tidings." What good tidings? God is here! Does that sound familiar? **"Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord."** Luke 2:10-11

"You that bring good tidings to Zion - to the people of God- get to the highest mountain and shout it so everyone can hear. Don't be afraid. Don't be timid. Don't hold back. Lift up your voice and shout it. Say it loud: Here is your God! Behold the Savior, the Deliverer has come. The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. Be comforted in this: Christ the Savior is born! The source of our comfort and our salvation is here."

Isaiah (8:22) spoke of a day when mankind would "look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom and they will be thrust into utter darkness." He could be describing today, but he continues, **"Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress... the people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned....for to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."** Isaiah 9:1-7.

Be comforted. Your God has come. How do we know? Is there a sign? Isaiah tells us: **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel. [God with us]."** Isaiah 7:14.

Be comforted. A savior has come. A deliverer has come. God has come to us! You aren't alone. Immanuel is with you. Remember we said the word of our God stands forever. And recall what John's gospel tells us: **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** John 1:14.

God's word stands forever and God's word has been made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. You aren't alone! Immanuel has come. Shout it from the mountain tops. God is with us.

Do you need a savior this morning? I do. Do you need a deliverer this morning? I do. Do you need the comfort of God's truth in your heart and mind? I do. Do you need God's presence and help in your life? I do. Do you need the Prince of Peace to bring peace to your troubled mind and heart? I do. And he has come to do just that.

Comfort, comfort my people. Listen how he cares for us. **"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."** Isaiah 40:11.

Comfort, comfort my people. That's the voice and message of Christmas for this morning. God has come to comfort his people. To save, deliver and be with us. In the desert and the wilderness. Feeling like you have been abandoned? Isaiah's message isn't finished yet:

"Why do you say, O Jacob and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?' Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Isaiah 40:27-31.

He is here today to comfort, to save and deliver us, to renew and strengthen us. Behold - God has come down to dwell among his people. The word made flesh. Immanuel. God with us. That's the good news. That's the comfort of Christmas.