**Isaiah 40:1-11** December 10, 2017

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Advent 2

*Isaiah 40:1Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for… 3A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God… 6A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “What shall I cry?” “All men are like grass… 8The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” (For a full reading of the text, you may consult you Bible.)*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**What Says the Lonesome Voice?**

**I. Comfort Them!**

A warm blanket on a cold morning. Hot chocolate. A hug. A listening ear. A crackling fire while it snows outside. Or, shade on a blistering hot day. Comfort. We even have so-called “comfort food.” The search for and appreciation of comfort did not start in the 21st century. It has been around since the beginning: when people first felt the hard edge of life and the shame of sin.

***“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”*** Much of the Word of God requires clarification and context. Even the simple message that Jesus is our Savior, you know, that actually requires a fair bit of explanation. But something in the first words of Isaiah 40 speaks a language everyone understands.

But let’s give it a little bit of context, because that can help us understand these words of comfort even better. The book of Isaiah is a complex book. Isaiah is a book of prophecy. This prophet lived about 700B.C. If you know your Bible well, perhaps you think of Isaiah as a prophet who foretold the Savior Jesus. Through him God made clear and prescient statements of who the Savior would be and what he would do, so much so that some have called him “The Evangelist of the Old Testament.” But Isaiah was also a prophet for ancient Israel. Isaiah prophesied things that would happen to Israel hundreds of years before Jesus. I mention that because that is what was happening in Isaiah chapter 40.

God, through Isaiah, had been predicting a time when the Israelites (the Jews) would be taken captive and live in exile. That would happen 100 years after Isaiah. While in captivity, God’s people would wonder. “Has God tossed us out of his presence like a worn out shoe in the wastebasket? Could they ever hope for reconciliation? Their sins against God had been many, and they had been continual, and they had been done in spite of many warnings. Could God ever be reconciled to them?”

The Lord sees this future day when his people will sit in their deserved captivity, and they will wonder if things can ever be as they once were, and God’s message to them is verse 1, ***“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.”***

Yes, God would forgive. In Isaiah’s day, God pictured it when the animal was brought to the temple as a sacrifice for sin. The person bringing the offering would lay his hand on the animal, and the person’s sins were commuted so that the animal would bear the sin. Then the animal was slaughtered. It was a graphic display of substitution; what is also called, vicarious atonement. Of course, the sheep and goats were only symbols of the Lamb of God who would come to take away the sin of the world.

And so this word spoken to Israel millennia ago, is also true for us. God’s message to a people suffering under the results of sin is ever the same. ***“Comfort, comfort my people, [their] sin has been paid for.”***

Now, before I go further, there is one little thing that we must understand. You know this, but it bears repeating. God says that this comfort is for ***“my people.”*** Jesus makes it more plain when he says, *“no one comes to the Father except through me”* and *“I know my sheep and my sheep know me”* (John 10:14). For those who scoff at God, there is no comfort. For those who say that we really don’t need a Savior from our own personal sin, there is no comfort. For those who reject the fact that Jesus is a unique Savior found in no other name under heaven, there is no comfort. God’s comfort is for those who listen and believe. It is the same way with the message of Christmas. At Christmas the world confuses the angels’ message of ***“peace on earth”*** and turns it into a mantra for political peace. But that was not the angels’ message. Their message was peace in a *“Savior [who] has been born to you.”*

Yet for those who have been blessed to know this Savior Jesus, ***“Comfort”*** is a timeless message. Remember that hymn we sang at the beginning of this worship service, hymn 11: “Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People”? What did you feel in hear when you sang those words? Maybe it was just another hymn to start a church service to you. I don’t know. But I’ll tell you what I feel whenever I sing that hymn, it is a sense of peace and a release of anxiety, every time. I hope it always will be that way. When God tells me, and not only when he tells me, but when God tells his servants to tell me, ***“Comfort, comfort, my people,”*** it tells me that God understands. He understands what I reveal to no one. He knows what I feel in my heart about the hopes and failings of life. He knows the things that nag me over the weeks and years and a lifetime. He knows the things I wish I could undo. He knows my hopes that were dashed to pieces, sometimes of my own doing and sometimes by the doings of other people. He knows the disappointments, the frustrations, the betrayals. He even knows the deserved consequences that we suffer for our foolish and sinful choices—like when we fail a test because we didn’t study, when a relationship disintegrates because of our selfishness and neglect. He knows all those things. And God tells his servants to tell me, ***“Comfort, comfort ye my people.”***

It is why we call ourselves Faith *Evangelical* Lutheran Church. That strange word, “Evangelical” means “Gospel oriented.” Evangelical, Gospel oriented, means that we focus on God’s message of comfort to us. A message that centers itself, on the good news that our sin has been paid for. That in Jesus Christ, all our failings are forgiven, and that in him we have a promise of a future better day, a day with no night.

**II. Tell Them To Prepare Themselves**

Yet while we focus on comfort, as long as we are in this world we must listen to more than simply comfort. We can’t sit in front of the fireplace 24/7. We can’t eat comfort food *all* the time. In the Lord’s revelation to Isaiah, the prophet hears a voice without a source, just a voice calling out, “Get ready for the Lord!”

Again, we need to remember what Isaiah sees with his prophetic vision. He looks forward to a time when Israel will be at a great distance from their promised land. They will sit in a land of slavery, wondering if God will ever be fully reconciled to them. Then Isaiah pictures the Lord coming out from his dwelling on Mount Zion, where the temple once stood, God coming out making his way toward his people in captivity. He journeys to retrieve them. As the Lord is about to go out, a voice calls, ***“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…”***

“Prepare the way” is a call to receive God as we ought.

Long ago, when a king wanted to visit his realm, it was the duty of the people who were receiving him, to make the road ready for him. The people would have to get out there with their shovels and pick-axes and wheelbarrows and fill in the potholes, smooth down the bumps. They were the king’s people, under his protection. It was only proper that they should make his way ready.

So the prophet admonishes God’s people to receive their God as they ought. He has saved them, forgiven them, been reconciled to them. He sought them out and brought them into his kingdom. Now it is proper for them to prepare themselves for their king.

Get rid of everything that gets in the way of the Lord working in our lives. This is not to say that we must become monks living in a monastery spending 18 hours a day praying. Instead, as we live where God has put us, we seek to uproot sin. We determine the temptations that we can keep a lid on (for nowhere in life can we live without temptations) and those temptations we need to flee from. The difference? For example, one person may be just fine with alcohol and really doesn’t get tempted by it. Another may need to clear every drop of alcohol out of the house, and to find an accountability partner just to be sure. This is just an example of how each of us needs to measure our own life and figure out what sorts of things get in the way of God. Like the prophet says, level the hills. Fill in the valleys. Straighten out the corners. As it says in the New Testament, *“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles”* (Hebrews 12:1). Get ready for God. He is the saving God who comforts your heart through all the difficulties of this world.

**III. Tell Them to Seek the Enduring**

The voice continues with one more truth: ***“All men are like grass… The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”*** (6,8). God underlines the need for clarity of thought.

Through high school and college, parents and students both spend a huge amount of time and money exploring future careers. At work, we set our hopes and aspirations on promotions and recognition, or at least pay raises and increased benefits. We all hope for more leisure time so that we can play the games, watch the entertainment, spend time with the family. None of these things is wrong in its place.

When you dedicate yourself to these goals, goals that are applauded by the world, and sought after by the people around you, listen to that lonesome voice out in the wilderness. ***“All men are like grass… The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”***

The grass and the flowers are blessings. God created them to gladden our hearts. But they are temporary. They brown up and dry out. ***“But the word of our God stands forever!”***

The Jews in the days following Isaiah, would sit in misery under the tyranny of the Babylonians. But where are the Babylonians today? Their ruins lie under the sands and silt of Iraq’s desert and rivers. Then the Persian and Greek empires each ruled over God’s people for a time, and then disintegrated. The Romans built an empire greater than any ever before it or in some respects, ever since. At times it persecuted God’s people with the sword so that even some Christians wondered if God’s people would survive. The Roman Empire lies in the garbage can of history. The Holy Roman Empire sought to extinguish the Reformation in its infancy. But it too is nothing more than a memory in history books. All are just another year’s crop of grass and flowers which quickly dry up and turn to dust. But God’s word endures. It endures in the life of his church. It will endure. It will continue to offer the comfort our Savior gives.

The same comfort Isaiah prophesied for an ancient people sitting in slavery, is the comfort waited for in a town in Bethlehem, is the comfort which 21st century believers still hope in. It reminds us that all that long list of troubles: the anxiety, disappointment, tragedy, etc.—to all of it God’s response is, ***“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.”*** How we wait for that Christmas comfort to come! Amen.