

Isaiah 40: 1-11  
November 26, 2023

The Prophet Isaiah, like you've seen on the front of the bulletin, is known as the "5th Gospel," because of the striking, beautiful prophecies it gives us about Christ and the words of grace and mercy from God toward his people. I still stand by that, but actually, if you read Isaiah in its entirety, you'd find that most of it, especially in the first 39 chapters, is deeply condemning, horrific warning and threats from God's own mouth. You see, Isaiah wrote in Israel about 740 years before Christ was born, and at this point in Israel's history, the nation had all but abandoned God. They had fallen in lust with other gods and if they spent any time worshiping the true God, it was a soulless, spiritless formality. They had become greedy, drunken, lust-filled monsters who cheated and lied to each other, abused their own poor and needy, and God used Isaiah to call them back, warning them that God is going to discipline them, and it will hurt. In the first 39 chapters of Isaiah's book, God warns the people that an Empire from the city of Babylon is going to come and destroy them, destroy their cities, their town, their farms, their families, their temple, and God is going to let them do it all! In fact, the Babylonians are going to take the Israelites away from their homes and force them to live in captivity refugee camps in Babylon. Life was going to be miserable, and it was their fault because they rejected God and his mercy, rejected his ways, rejected his words, and rejected all his attempts to call them back and this was the only way to wake them up!

But in the 40th chapter, something changes. It's no longer warning and threats, but promises and forgiveness. No longer is God far off. Now, he's coming near. And in these eleven verses, God through Isaiah shows us what God does when he comes near. **When God comes near, 1. He comforts the afflicted, 2. He prepares hearts for his arrival, 3. He arrives through his Word, 4. And he comes in tender strength.**

1. When God comes near, he comforts the afflicted.

Again, the tone of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah is not positive. God is saying, "you have rebelled against me. You have sinned. You deserve everything that you have coming. You deserve to be destroyed." And here, after all this harshness, God tells Isaiah, "Comfort, Comfort *my* people, says the Lord *their* God." "Even after they have sinned against me, rebelled against me, forgotten me, I haven't forgotten them. They are still *my* people, and I am *their* God." God tells Isaiah to speak tenderly to the people of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, because even the very tone of his voice should reflect the warmth and kindness of God's heart. Their warfare is over, their iniquity forgiven, and they have received double for all of their sins.

What exactly is God talking about? Immediately in Isaiah's day, God is saying that even though he's going to let them be taken over by their enemies, he still loves them and forgives them and it won't last forever. Their war will be over, their discipline will end. That's true, but there's something much deeper going on here- not just for Israel, but all of God's people, all Christians. God afflicts his people with hardship, guilt, condemnation. He allows you to experience addiction, sickness, loss, depression, disappointment, and ultimately he puts your sins in your face and says "look at them. Look at what you've done! You've rebelled against me! You've sinned against me!" But that is *not* his final word to you. Everything he allows to happen to you is so that your heart is open for his comfort- and what is that

comfort? Not just “things will get better, there’s a light at the end of the tunnel” sentimentality. Your warfare is over- your deep existential questions- “do I matter,” “does God love me,” “am I worthy,” “could God ever accept me,” and your battle with them is over because your iniquity has been forgiven. Because when God came near, he was born in Bethlehem 700 years after Isaiah wrote these words, and he willingly suffered and died for your rebellion- his blood makes you *his*, you are *his* people, he is *your* God. And his suffering is more than double what you deserved, so you can receive more than double what you don’t deserve, God’s riches and glory and love and forgiveness and honor. That is the comfort your God has for you.

## 2. He prepares.

Yet, we have to ask the question- how does God prepare us for this comfort? This comfort from God is revolutionary and life changing, and like any significant change, preparation often takes place before. Isaiah’s words paint a picture of a king coming, but in order for him to come, a road must be built in the wilderness. Rocks have to be moved out of the way, hills need to be flattened, valleys need to be raised up so that this road can be straight and the king can come. As you can see in the Gospel reading, this was fulfilled when John the Baptist came in the desert and preached to the people- what was his message? “Repent!” I want to clarify, John’s message was not, “Do better,” “pray more,” “give more money to the temple.” The people that were morally, religiously better than anyone else were the ones that John the Baptist was most harsh toward. Sure, he gave people instructions on how to please God, but the point was that it doesn’t matter how good you are, how religious you are, how well you’re doing, how successful and prosperous your life is, you are damned before God and you need to repent and humble yourself and ask for his forgiveness. Spiritually speaking, that is what prepared the way for Jesus himself to present the comfort of his life-giving sacrifice.

This hasn’t changed. Years ago in Reno,, I preached a sermon that broke the cardinal rule- it was 26 minutes- 6 minutes over the acceptable length of 20 minutes. Afterwards, several of the members gave me some grief for it, and it was well-deserved. But one man came to me in tears and thanked me and said that he desperately needed to hear that sermon. That man happened to be in battle with a horrible drug addiction, his marriage was in trouble, and he had just gotten out of jail. I remember during the sermon he was hanging on every word, and he was moved to tears as he came to the Lord’s Supper and heard that even though he had hurt so many people, his sins were forgiven and he could go in peace. Same sermon! Same forgiveness! I never understood how two people could hear the same sermon, and one could say, “meh,” and the other be moved to tears! This text answers that question. It wasn’t because my words were so eloquent. In fact, I can say with confidence that they were not! *God prepared him for comfort*. In order for you to be comforted by God’s message of forgiveness, you have to be uncomfortable. In order for God’s forgiveness to mean something to you, you have to feel the weight of guilt on your shoulders. In order for God to end your warfare, you have to be fighting and losing. In order to feel the joy and comfort of your iniquity being forgiven, you have to feel the pain and burden of your iniquity. That’s how God prepares the way. So if you are burdened, if you are in pain, if you feel guilty, if your heart is broken, thank God! He has prepared your heart for his divine comfort. You are forgiven, you are cherished, he is your God, and you are his people.

## 3. He arrives in his Word

We’ve established that God arrives to us to comfort us with his Gospel, but first, he often prepares us by humbling us, and God then goes so far to say that all flesh, all people are going to see the glory of the

Lord, they are going to be in the presence of the Lord himself, which to the Old Testament audience is a scandalous idea. How can this happen? How does God come to people?

It's not because people have anything to offer him. God instructs Isaiah to cry out, what should he cry out? A cold, crushing reality: All people are like grass, and their glory, the very best accomplishments and moral attributes, are like flowers. Pretty? Sure. Lasting? No. Give it a moment and the elements destroy it. Humankind's accomplishments, their wisdom, their goodness is incinerated in the blazing light of God's glory. What does that mean? That means that if your connection to God is based on all the things you have to offer him, you'll never find him. That means that if your status in God's heart is based on your morality, your religious behavior, your qualities, you'll be destroyed under the weight of what God actually expects of human beings because he's perfect, not just good, *perfect*. If God is going to come to you, it will be through his Word. It was through his Word given to Isaiah that God humbled, comforted, and sustained his people in their suffering. And it is through those same words, and the words recorded by the prophets and apostles that God comes and dwells with us, changes us, empower us, comforts us today. And it is that Word, something so ordinary, so mundane- a book- that God reveals himself to sinners so that sinners like Israel, Jerusalem, also called "Zion," can stand on the mountain tops, comforted, empower, joyful and proclaim to those who need comfort- "Behold, your God. Not a God, *your God*. Not, Jesus died on the cross, but Jesus was murdered on the cross *for you*. He is your God, not a distant deity, not an impersonal force, not a prosecutor, but *your God*.

#### 4. He comes with tender strength.

This brings me to my last point, covering verses 10 and 11. When the Lord comes near, he comes with tender strength. It's striking- in verse 10 we are given a picture of a God of judgment and payback- he's going to give people what they deserve. That should scare you. And in the very next verse, he's going to be tender with his lambs and his ewes and embrace them into his breast. Well, which is it? Is God powerful and mighty and just and vengeful, or is he kind, tender, soft, and sweet? *Yes*. Look at the stained glass windows, that same Jesus who walks on water and demands obedience from the wind and waves is the same Jesus who embraces little lambs into his arms. The same Jesus who says "Woe to you, hypocrites" and preaches about the fires of Hell is the same Jesus that comforts the broken hearted, heals the sick, and forgives sins. He's both.

Jesus in his wisdom knows exactly what we need, not just physically, but spiritually. Chances are, some of us in this room don't need to be comforted, but humbled. Some of us in this room, however, are humble enough and need God's comfort. Often, we as individuals are both haughty and in despair depending on the day or the hour, and the beauty of Jesus' Gospel is that it heals both pride and despair. Do you need to be taken down a few notches? Look at the Cross and see what the perfect holy Son of God had to suffer because you were so evil, lost and depraved. Are you in despair? Do you feel worthless, guilty, and ashamed? Look at the cross! That is what God was willing to suffer just so he could fold you into his breast. That's what the cross does. It humbles God's people. It strengthens God's people. It comforts God's people. Amen.