

Comfort My People

^{CEB} **Isaiah 40:1-11** Comfort, comfort my people! says your God. ² Speak compassionately to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her compulsory service has ended, that her penalty has been paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins! ³ A voice is crying out: "Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! ⁴ Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. ⁵ The LORD's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD's mouth has commanded it." ⁶ A voice was saying: "Call out!" And another said, "What should I call out?" All flesh is grass; all its loyalty is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass dries up and the flower withers when the LORD's breath blows on it. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass dries up; the flower withers, but our God's word will exist forever. ⁹ Go up on a high mountain, messenger Zion! Raise your voice and shout, messenger Jerusalem! Raise it; don't be afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ Here is the LORD God, coming with strength, with a triumphant arm, bringing his reward with him and his payment before him. ¹¹ Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap. He will gently guide the nursing ewes.

2 Peter 3:8-9 CEB Don't let it escape your notice, dear friends, that with the Lord a single day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a single day. ⁹ The Lord isn't slow to keep his promise, as some think of slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish but all to change their hearts and lives.

^{CEB} **Mark 1:1-3** The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, ² happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, ³ a voice shouting in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."

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After King Solomon died, the nation of Israel split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was still called Israel. The southern kingdom, which included the city of Jerusalem, was called Judah. After a few centuries, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried many of the people off into captivity, never to be heard of again. This is sometimes referred to as the ten lost tribes of Israel. In 586 BC, the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The upper levels of society were carried off to Babylon. The peasants were left in the land to fend for themselves, and were at the mercy of various marauding neighbors.

The Babylonians gave the Jewish captives a lot of freedom to enter into business relationships and many of them became prosperous. That didn't remove the shame and defeat that they felt. In some ways it made matters worse culturally and religiously. They could see their defeat as a sign of weakness on the part of the God of Israel and Judah. Their prosperity in the land of captivity could be attributed to Marduk and Nebo and other Babylonian gods. The Jewish community in Babylon ran the risk of losing their religious identity, faced extinction as a family that descended from Abraham and Sarah, and could become assimilated into Babylonian culture. Indeed, that was exactly what the Babylonian policy was designed to do. "In the face of loss of temple, nationhood, and homeland, can a people confess" that God is good and great?

Today's reading from Isaiah begins with the words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." Those of us that dearly love Handel's *Messiah* can hear the clear voice of a tenor singing those words. We automatically think that these are God's instructions to Isaiah. But I learned something this week. God is speaking, not to Isaiah, but to the heavenly council. This body is inferred in Genesis: "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us. . ." (Gen 1:26 CEB) It is mentioned specifically at the beginning of the book of Job, "One day the divine beings came to present themselves before the LORD . . ." (Job 1:6 CEB) There's no clear and detailed description in scripture but we can assume that angels, cherubim, and seraphim are included. Here in Isaiah chapter forty, verse one, God is giving a command to multiple beings. The southern translation would be, "Y'all comfort, y'all comfort my people." God has assembled the heavenly host. These are servants of the sovereign of the universe. Psalm 82 tells us how God's regard for justice and compassion for all who suffer, distinguishes God from the rest of the heavenly council.

A second command is also in the plural, "Y'all prepare a highway for the Lord." The heavenly beings get another command to carry out. Prepare the way for God to get involved in the circumstances of his people. Judah is about to be restored, but that restoration doesn't originate in human efforts, but instead comes from "God's gracious reentry into the life of" this outcast nation. In the process, the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

The third command is singular, "You proclaim!" and the prophet responds, "What shall **I** proclaim?" First, declare that all people are grass. They are weak and unreliable. Don't put your ultimate trust in people, no matter what their position might be. You know that the displaced, the powerless, and the abused are like grass, but the despot, the dictator, and abusive boss will wither and fade, when God comes to reign. In the final analysis, hope in individuals or even in the strength of the community is unreliable because humans are fickle, inconstant, and break their promises.

Second, shout that God has arrived! Shout it from the mountain tops! Go tell it on the mountain. God is present and involved. And be sure to reassure people and tell them to not be afraid.

Third, the Lord God comes with might, with a strong arm. And then, the very next verse speaks of God's gentleness. Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; he will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap. He will gently guide the nursing ewes. God's mighty arm is not that of a tyrant, but of a gentle shepherd. God's gentle nature is an expression of might, and God's strength is found in gentleness and love. God chooses to make a nation of the most insignificant, tattered group of tribes on earth, the least powerful of any community in the kingdoms of the ancient near east. God chooses a humble Jewish girl to be the bearer of the Messiah. God decides to shuck off the heavenly glories and take on the weakness and sufferings of human flesh in the person of Jesus.

We need to ask ourselves, who is the message of the Isaiah text for? It seems obvious that it spoke to the descendants of Abraham who were captives in Babylon. As we noted last week, Cyrus the Great of Persia is named as God's anointed. He conquers Babylon and sends the Jews home to rebuild their cities and their temple. Was God's message of comfort just for the Jewish captives in Babylon? The writer of Mark's Gospel felt that the message of God's involvement with and care for his people was pertinent again in his day, that Emmanuel, God-with-us, had come and walked among the people,

teaching by word and example. In fact, this message of God's coming, God's presence, and God's eternal might expressed in gentleness is always needed somewhere.

Consumerism propelled by individualism has great control of our resources, but this message directs us away from self to compassion for others. Lust for energy threatens our environment. Instant gratification robs us of patience and awareness of others. Continuous warfare destroys families, and damages bodies, minds, and spirits. Despite the poor record that brutal conflict has for improving things, we return again and again to the same approach. Religious intolerance fosters hate, not love, pits followers against each other, and besmirches God's name in the process. We have so many "little 'g' gods" that we devote so much time, energy, and money to, that we must admit that we worship them. But we are but grass and our way of living is unstable and destructive.

And yet, there is good news if we will but listen. There is good news that we need to proclaim, just as Isaiah did.

Put your trust in God! Fear not! The Lord is mighty, and comes with gentleness to guide us and care for us. Amen.

God's love, mercy, and gentleness
are signs of strength...not weakness.
Understand that only love overcomes hate.
Practice the strength of love, mercy, and
gentleness in your own life.