

Sermon outline on Isaiah 40: 1-11

God's people need comfort, today!

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1).

Introduction: We all need God's comfort

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). What does Isaiah mean by the word "comfort"?

In the Bible "comfort" is something good that takes care of bad things. Comfort does not always take away the bad things. Sometimes it makes us strong enough to endure it and to keep on going. Sometimes it dries up our tears and sometimes it makes us strong enough to cry enough. It at least strengthens our determination. It is comfort that allows us to keep on living in or during or after bad things have happened to us.

In Isaiah's day, and in our day, there are so many awful things happening, also to good Christian folks, that we have a notable and even desperate need for comfort.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). The people left in Jerusalem needed to hear those words. The many Judeans in exile, praying to return to their country and to have their city and temple restored, needed to hear those words.

In the previous chapter, Isaiah spoke about the "Babylonian captivity." Everyone knew about the Babylonians. How nothing and no one could stop them. How they conquered everything and everyone in their path. How entire populations were being forcibly moved around their Empire to suit their nationalistic and imperialistic whims.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). These words needed to be heard by those Judeans who had lost loved ones in battle. These words needed to be heard by the oppressed of Judah. Widows, orphans, the poor, all who had their rights trampled upon and their property expropriated and disowned. All who experienced discrimination simply because they were Jews, foreigners in the enemy's country and under a government hostile towards them. They would appeal for justice to those in authority, but the officials and the lords of their day also would accept bribes and rule against them and add to their oppression through their graft and corruption.

1. God's word of comfort still needs to be heard today:

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). These words need to be heard by all those who face death and dreadful decease - their own, or the death and life threatening illness of a loved one. Those who suffer as a result of HIV and Aids, TB, cancer, heart-attacks, strokes, - they have to hear these words.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). These words must be heard today by the many across our country who suffer because of their broken marriage relationships. Young men and women get married with many dreams and a lot of excitement, much joy and lots of pomp and ceremony, often to have to leave their marriages with pain, in anger and excruciating disappointment.

These words of comfort also need to be heard by the children from these broken marriages. The men, women, and children from broken marriages need to hear God's word of comfort.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). These words must be heard by those who live with unemployment, poverty, homelessness, or those who experienced great financial loss and bankrupted businesses. And those who lost everything as a result of dictatorship, or the greed of

politicians and officials, of failed government and a failed state. It needs to be heard by those who are persecuted and bullied and robbed and financially abused as a result of the greed of the powerful and influential.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). Children and teenagers who are intimidated, rejected by their peers, who have no friends, who feel abandoned by family and unaccepted by their fellow learners and educators, need to hear these words. All youngsters who are bullied simply must listen to these words.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). The victims of abuse badly need to hear these words. Women and children who suffer behind closed doors, because of physical, sexual and emotional abuse! Orphans and widows, and child headed families, aunts and grannies looking after too many orphaned children and are crying for help and support, and those who are robbed and abused by the corruption of the establishment - need God's comfort.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). *You need to hear these words from the Bible if you carry the heavy burden of self-blame, of guilt, of a terrible self image as a result of sin and the burden of evil. If you are pressed down by stress, hopelessness, sadness, loneliness and heartache and if you feel it is only your fault, you need to heed God's decree to comfort his people!*

Because God is coming to you
and his coming means that he will grant you comfort.
You are not alone, anymore,
because our God is coming to you.

2. God's comfort brings about that he is coming to us in divine strength.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). What is the comfort Isaiah is speaking about? In the Bible, real comfort is not something that man can bring; *it is something that comes only from God.* Only God provides the good things that take care of the dreadful things we have to deal with.

Isaiah is told to teach us about the source of our comfort: *"the Sovereign LORD comes with power ..." (vs 10).* *"The glory of the LORD will be revealed" (vs 5).* *"Here is your God" that can also be translated as: "Your God is here!" (vs 9).* It all boils down to one thing: God is coming into our situation to make that difference we so desperately need: Our God is here - today!

Believe this: Our God is coming! He is coming to you! The sovereign God acts in grace. The God of glory and power who holds all things in his mighty hand and determines what is best for all people and can intervene in all events, is coming to show his mercy and imparts his comfort. And what a remarkable God he is. Later in chapter 40 Isaiah tells us how great our God really is. *"To whom, then, will you compare God?" "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?"* says the Holy One.

"Who created all these?" asks the Lord. *"He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing" (Is 40:18,25,26).*

Do you know that there are more stars in the universe than people on earth? Yet God knows each star by name and keeps them on their track through the universe. He who counts the stars, also counts the hair on our heads. It is he who is coming to comfort us.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1). *"Because I am coming."* "Because your God, is here!"

3. God is certainly, undoubtedly, coming to us in grace and in mercy.

The people of Judah had sinned against the Lord through idolatry, injustice, immorality, impurity, disobedience, shunning of God's commandments and the persecution of his prophets.

But they were still his people. God still loved them. He punished them through exile and making them foreigners in a hostile country and empire, but, he did not forsake them.

In returning to them with forgiveness, and in listening to their prayers of repentance, God decided to come to his people to bring them comfort.

How would he comfort them? What would he do?

We see four things in our Scripture reading today explained by four different words and concepts.

a) *First of all*, we hear the **word of forgiveness**. The coming of God means the comfort of the preaching of a word of forgiveness to people who probably believed their sins were too many and too horrible to be forgiven.

(Is 40:2) *"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."*

"Speak tenderly" means to speak with mercy and empathy, even when you speak to people harvesting the bitter fruits of their sins and disobedience. "Hard service" refers to their slavery in a foreign country. "Double" means their suffering has been more than enough. God is merciful. God forgives. God's forgiveness is bigger than his punishment.

God finally did this, of course, by the cross of our Lord. There, Jesus received more than double; he received a hundred-fold more than what we deserved, in our place. He obviously deserved no punishment at all. But God punished Jesus in order to forgive us. He comes to us in Christ Jesus to comfort us with the message: Your sin has been paid for! Jesus has received from the Lord's hand double punishment for all our sins.

b) *Secondly*, we hear a **word of providence**. God's comfort comes through providing in their needs. How would they be able to trek through the wilderness with all its dangers and enemies? *"In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God ..."*

Through his Word, through his providence revealed through and announced by his prophets, a high way would be provided through the wilderness. (See in Nehemiah and Ezra how this promise was fulfilled). God is coming. No wilderness or obstacle will stand in his way.

God tells them that they have to get ready, because he would be bringing them back to Jerusalem and to the Temple. The Judeans had a rough road ahead of them as they returned to the Promised Land, but the Lord would go before them to open the way (Is 40:3). (As God has done in the days of Moses!)

The ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy is the ministry of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus (Mt 3:1-6).

c) *Thirdly*, we hear a **word of promise**. But in quite an unusual way:

(Is 40:6-7) A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" *"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. (7) The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass."*

Judah feared the power of people. They feared the power of the Babylonians, their king, their armies and their hostile settlements along the way back to Jerusalem.

But in comparison to God's power, all men are like grass. God is coming and *his coming means that all kings and kingdoms are like grass*. Even Babylon. The pagan empires fulfilled their purpose and then faded away. Like all kingdoms, governments and states eventually do. ***What remains is God, his mighty hand, his comfort and his promises.***

Jesus remains forever. The Messianic Kingdom remains forever. The comfort of the Prince of peace remains forever.

d) *Fourthly*, we hear a **word of peace**. The coming of God means "good tidings" (Is 40:9). Back then it was the final defeat of Babylon and the home coming of Judah to Zion, the City of God. To Jerusalem, to the city of peace!

The Good News today is the defeat of all evil by Jesus Christ and the salvation of all who trust in him.

4. Conclusion: *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1)*. Whether we recognize it or not, comfort is what everyone needs. On this Lord's Day we once again celebrate that God, in Christ, has already come and his comfort is already ours.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40:1).

This is the Word of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.