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Fourth Sunday of Advent — Isaiah 40,1-8
18 December 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of Old Testament lesson from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, which was read earlier:

“Comfort, O Comfort, My people,” says your God.
“Speak kindly to Jerusalem.”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Introduction. When I hear these magnificent words of comfort given to us through the prophet Isaiah, in my head I cannot separate the words from the beautiful music of Handel’s “Messiah.” It seems the music captures the feelings of God for His people. “Comfort, comfort My people!”

But more than that, these words speak of kindness, of tenderness.

We’ve all seen the bumper stickers or T-shirts that have a slogan on them: “I heart ...” and then fill in the blank.

I heart my Great Pyrenees.

I heart S.F.

I heart “The Raiders” or “The 49ers” or the “Bears.”

The possibilities are endless.

To use the symbol of a heart means “I love” whatever the object is that goes after the heart.

In a way, that is what God is saying in today’s text from Isaiah. When God says:

“Speak kindly to Jerusalem”; or, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem”;

the literal translation would be:

“Speak to the heart of Jerusalem.”

Comfort and love are intertwined and are bound together in God’s vocabulary.

“Comfort,” says God. “I heart Jerusalem.”

Here God is speaking from the heart to the heart. He is speaking from His unfathomable, merciful love in heart speech to the heart of Jerusalem, which does not in any way, shape, or form deserve God’s tender, kind, heartfelt words of comfort.

As we prepare for the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we do well to ponder the deep meaning of this Word of Comfort. This brings me to today’s sermon topic: “**Comfort — A Word Spoken From God’s Heart.**” I’ll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) The Need For Comfort;**
- 2) True Comfort;** and,
- 3) Comfort That Lasts.**

1) The Need for Comfort. Isaiah began his ministry about 740 years before the birth of Jesus. The situation that Isaiah faced was that God’s people had strayed from God’s Word. Isaiah had been raised up by God to preach repentance. He told them that on account of their sins God was going to punish them – their cities would be in ruins and they

would be taken into exile.

This was a pretty bleak picture and many people did not appreciate Isaiah. However, in 586 BC Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and part of Isaiah's prophecies found their fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Isaiah, however, did not just preach "doom and gloom." Isaiah also spoke words of comfort. These words of comfort were words of hope. These were words of promise.

He also spoke of a time when God would redeem His people from their exile in Babylon.

And more than this, Isaiah also spoke of a time when God would provide for a Savior; this would be a time that would see more than a redemption from physical exile, but it would be a time of redemption from sin, death, and the devil. These indeed were words of comfort.

Even though the people had really sinned, God still referred to them as "My people." Punishment and exile did not mean that God had given up on them. On the contrary, it meant that now they could remember those words given by God to Isaiah. And now they could say, "Ah ha!" and remember that God promised that He would be with them. That they were not alone. That the exile would come to an end and their restoration would be accomplished.

This is true for us as well. For when we read these words we realize that our God is a God of history. He created history and moves through History. This is why the Old Testament lessons during Advent always point to God acting in history and always point to that time when He will act in Jesus.

Thus, when we hear these words today we are not dealing with "timeless" words. Rather, we are dealing with words of promise that find a focus. The immediate focus of the exiled Israelites was the return

from exile.

God judged Israel because it was both a nation as well as being a people chosen by God. And the punishment that resulted from that judgment was pretty devastating. It was the destruction of Jerusalem. It was a levelling of the temple; God permitted His Own House to be destroyed. The survivors were taken into exile.

It looked to all appearances that God had deserted His people. Indeed, elsewhere, Isaiah delivers God's word (Isaiah 59,1-2):

Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short
That it cannot save; Neither is His ear so dull
That it cannot hear.
But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your
God,
And your sins have hid His face from you, so that He does not hear

These are strong words. In effect, it means that sin builds walls. It is at this point that the destructiveness of sin is revealed. It isolates. It looks to God and imagines that senility has set in, with an arm drained of strength which is powerless, and ears which cannot hear. But the wall that sins builds means that God face is hidden and it seems as if His ears are plugged.

But Isaiah delivers the word of the Law — God's Holiness — to break down that wall of separation. And it is at this point that Isaiah's word of promise can break through to provide Comfort.

2) True Comfort. True Comfort comes with the words: "My people." God has not forgotten His people, His arm is not too short or atrophied to save, nor are His ears too stopped up to hear.

Judgment on sin is not the last word God has to say. Rather, the last word then, as it is in this Advent-tide is that "iniquity has been removed" — sin has been forgiven. Heartfelt words spoken from the

heart — spoken from God's heart!

The picture that Isaiah paints is a cosmic highway construction project: a smooth highway in the desert, valleys that are lifted up, mountains that have been brought low, rugged terrain that has been made smooth.

Whatever impediment stands between God and His people is to be eliminated. In today's parlance, God is well-chair accessible. But more than that. All the impediments will be eliminated. And this accessibility can be summed up in one word: Forgiveness. God is now sinner-accessible.

To get to God is beyond our abilities. Our sins would continually make us doubt that by ourselves we could gain access to the heavenly throne.

But true Comfort is knowing that God has reconciled Himself to and with His people. The promise is that their exile will end and they will be restored to their land. This is not something the people could do by their own strength, by their well-wishing.

Yet Isaiah looks beyond a restoration of the exiles from Babylon. He looks forward to a time when "Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together."

Here the prophet is speaking of you and I. For in our Baptism, we have become the new Israel, chosen not on account of our goodness, but on account of our helplessness.

We live in frailty. Often we do not realize it. The young believe that they will live forever and those who are older put off these thoughts of frailty or even of sickness or death.

God puts our efforts into perspective:

⁶ A voice says, “Call out.”

Then He answered, “What shall I call out?”

All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the Word of our God stands forever.

When we seek comfort only from human sources we will find we are putting our trust in something that not only will not last, it cannot last. Human beings fail others. The failure is not by design, although that can happen, but it is the very nature of life itself.

We know that people sometimes move away. Even within families, children marry and move — sometimes they are close and sometimes they are far away. We know that friendships change as interests change. Unfortunately, at times, friends become enemies. We know all too well that divorce separates. But in a real sense, death will finally break what human support we have.

So, where is comfort that lasts?

3) Comfort That Lasts. The last words of today’s text tell us, and they are words that are echoed in the New Testament in Peter’s First Epistle.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the Word of our God stands forever.

Grass withers. Flowers fade. In the light of the Word of God, for example, I have never quite understood why floral tributes are lavished on caskets at funerals. Flowers fade — cut flowers are not symbols of life, but death postponed in a flask of water.

When my mother-in-law died, the family went to a flower shop operated out of a home. There were floral tributes one could buy, and banners to place on the wreaths, and the banners were in two popular languages, English and German. The owner intimated that a token of love would be in direct proportion of how much one would spend on a floral tribute. Friends, that would not be a token of love; that would be a token of guilt.

In another instance, I remember being with a family whose mother had cancer and her last days were in a coma. In grief, one daughter wondered whether the devil could assault her mother's faith while she was in this weakened condition. I said I didn't think so. I pointed to Paul's words in Romans 8,26:

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

When we are too weak to pray for ourselves, the Holy Spirit, given to us at our Baptism, intercedes for us with "groanings which cannot be uttered."

In the face of the last enemy, death, God provides this Word of Comfort. In the words of the Twenty-third Psalm, as we prepare to walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, we hear God's Words: "Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." Comfort. Protection against our enemies, the enemies that would if they could separate us from God, sin, Death, and the Devil. But God's rod and staff, His Eternal Word, the Word made flesh for Whom we wait, Jesus Christ, protects us.

This is a true word of comfort. Comfort has to be rooted in Jesus Christ. That is the only Comfort that lasts — that reconciliation with God without any merit on our part.

We gather this morning around God's Word, but not as a support group. It is true that our gathering encourages us. But we know we

gather because God has called us together. On other Sundays, we gather around His Word, to gather around His body and blood. At all times we gather so that He can renew us. So that He can sustain us. It is in this sustaining that we are comforted. It is in being sustained that we can comfort others. And comfort them with a comfort that lasts.

Conclusion. The world around us would offer many kinds of comfort.

But our God would come to us and speak the Words we need to hear: “You are My people.”

You are not my people on account of your strength, or your goodness.

You are My people on account of what Jesus has done in your place.

God “hearts” you and me on account of Jesus.

With the forgiveness that Jesus has purchased for us with His innocent suffering and death, and with His glorious resurrection, the highway to God is sinner-accessible. It is on this highway that we stand. It is on this Word that we receive words of Comfort, not just for ourselves, but so that when we Comfort we can pass on a Word of Comfort that truly lasts. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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