

Coming Soon: The God of His Word!

(Isaiah 40:1-11) Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness 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. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." ⁹ You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

In Christ Jesus, whose Word gives life, dear fellow redeemed,

As some of you may know, I not only have the privilege of serving as one of your pastors, I have also been called to serve as the district pastor or president of our Northern Wisconsin District of WELS. As part of that ministry, I provide call lists to congregations who are seeking a pastor. When I put such a list together, I include a sentence or two summarizing the qualities of the various men that I'm presenting for consideration. For example, I might say that, "Pastor Jones is a humble man with an outgoing personality. He meets people well and can strike up a conversation with just about anyone." It's not exactly a biography, but it gives you a sense that this is a friendly fellow.

What if in one of my summaries, I noted that "Pastor Smith has many fine gifts for ministry and is known by all to be a man of his word." What would that last phrase tell you about the candidate? That he's honest and truthful? Sure, that's something I would hope to be able to say about every pastor. But the phrase, "man of his word" implies a bit more. This is a man of integrity. You can count on him. When he tells you that he's going to do something, it gets done—without fail!

Today I'm not here to present a call list. No, today I have the greatest privilege of all. I present to you our Advent Lord. Coming Soon: The God of His Word! 1) Who always means what he says; and 2) who always does what he promises.

Anyone who has even a passing knowledge of Scripture is aware of the fact that our God says a great deal. He truly is the God of his Word, using language, written and spoken, to communicate with us. For this reason he calls people throughout the ages to speak his on his behalf. To this end he tells people exactly what to say, as he does here for the Prophet Isaiah: **"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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.” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

You might expect such comforting words to be a welcomed message at any time, but especially in Isaiah's day. You see, the first 39 chapters of his prophecy are filled with gloom and doom. God gives Isaiah the task of pointing out his people's many sins. God's people had turned their backs on him. They had no regard for his will and no ears for his Word. They worshipped idols and embraced the shameful lifestyles of the heathen nations around them. God's patience with them was running out. He told them so and meant it. Because of their sin, a time was coming in the future when God would have them carried off into exile in Babylon. And to break their spirit, he would have their beloved Jerusalem along with its temple destroyed. There would be nothing to come back to. What a crushing, hopeless message. Until you turn the page from Isaiah 39 to chapter 40.

Suddenly everything changes. Isaiah is to speak comfort to people who have yet to experience God's anger. But they will. God means what he says. In a matter of decades the people will be taken captive. Then God will get their attention. Some will listen and repent and when they do, they will hear that their sin has been paid for. But just exactly what does that mean? Like a parent who has put his child in a timeout, is God saying, “Time's up. You can come out now.”? Can seventy years of exile really atone for the people's sin and defiance? No, sin's wages are far greater.

We get a better understanding of what God is saying when we look at the next verse: **“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” (Isaiah 40:3).** God has no intention of making his people pay having them come crawling back to him. He wants to rush to their side. He wants a home in their hearts. What is stopping him? God uses a map to illustrate the problem. Imagine God dwelling in Jerusalem. His exiled people would be in Babylon. God's not interested in a roundabout way into their lives. He wants a straight path which would require a journey through a series of unscalable mountain ranges with nothing but deep and dangerous valleys between them. So God calls on his people to make a highway for him, not through the Arabian Desert, but to their hearts, where currently mountains of sinful pride and self-satisfaction together with valleys formed by doubt and unbelief, block God's path. Unless these obstacles are removed, unless the mountains are made low and the rough ground made level, God cannot come to his people. And if that's the case, the sinner cannot survive. He will perish, not in Babylon, but in hell.

This was true in Isaiah's day. It's no less true today. Coming soon is the God of his Word. He wants to celebrate with us the birth of his one and only Son. As Christmas approaches, how will God find us? How will he find our hearts? Is there a quiet place within reserved for him and his message? I must confess that my own heart fills up with so many other things, not the least which is a sinful self-reliance that takes great pride in solving my own problems and conquering my own fears and anxieties. Is it the same for you? Or has some other idol captured your heart's devotion? What should God do to get our attention? For his ancient people it was the threat of exile and even then, most did not listen. For us, God lays down the plain, unvarnished truth. He puts before my heart the problem I cannot solve, a fear I cannot overcome on my own. He says: **“All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness 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.” (Isaiah 40:6-7).**

God warned our first parents “If you sin, you will surely die.” (Genesis 2:17). Still they sinned and in time they died. God spoke those words so long ago and yet the breath of his warning still

cuts sinners down to this day. Every obituary that we read reminds us that God means what he says. Like the grass of the field and the flowers in our summer gardens, we sinners last only a season until our unfaithfulness does us in. Oddly enough, this, in part, is the message of Advent. How so? It is only when God brings us sinners to the reality that we are grass, only when he convinces us of the depth of our depravity and brings us to realize that our sin kills not just the body, but the soul forever, only as God works all this through his Word, does he then turn our hearts in repentance from sin in all its misery to Christ in all his saving glory.

This is what we celebrate on Christmas and always: **“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” (Isaiah 40:8).** Ours is the God of his Word! He means what he says and, thanks be to Him, he does what he promises. He told our first parents that sin would bring about their death. They ignored his warning. What did God do next? He came to the rescue, promising that he would send a sin-bearer, a Satan-smasher, who would take the sinner’s place under God’s wrath. Christmas is the fulfilment of that promise. In all the busyness of this season, don’t lose sight of what it is all about. Because of the Baby born to be our Substitute, you will not suffer the fate your sin has earned you. God’s own Son jumped into the fray. In your place he suffered the burning breath of God’s wrath. Like grass his body withered away on the cross and together with his soul suffered the torments of hell. I can’t imagine, I don’t want to imagine the excruciating torture he endured for our sinful pride, for our stubborn self-reliance, for our worship of idols, for our failure to heed his warnings and for our refusal to trust his promises. He paid for it all, even for our failure to properly appreciate all that he’s done for us. He settled our debt once and for all. This is the comfort that God speaks so tenderly to us and all his people in the opening verses of our text. Our greatest comfort is this: Jesus completed our hard service. He paid for our sin and not only that, he rose from the dead to bring us double blessing from the Lord’s hand.

We are doubly blessed, are we not? We who were born hell-bound, have been rescued by the God of his Word. By his gospel he has called us to faith in Jesus and so made us his people. By the same gospel he promises to keep us his own until we are safe with him forever.

“Picture it this way.” says Isaiah. **“See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.” (Isaiah 40:10).** The prophet transports us to the end of time. Perhaps this is the scene just hours from now. Our Lord has returned as the great Conqueror. He has taken on sin, death, and hell and has defeated all three. With him is his reward, the souls he has worked so hard to free from Satan’s clutches. In their number are the friends and family we know so well and love so much. Suddenly it becomes apparent to us why this moment has not come sooner. As Peter explains: **“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9).** Jesus has not yet returned because he’s patiently gathering more souls as we and others proclaim him to our world. In the same patient love he’s dealing with you and me. Look: **“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” (Isaiah 40:11).** Our Savior lives to shepherd us to his home above. His plan of salvation is not the survival of the fittest. He’s bringing all of us along, even us weak and fragile sheep who are in constant need of his grace and forgiveness. He is going to carry us close to his heart all the way to heaven. He will not leave you behind. You can count on this, my friends, because ours is the God of his Word who always means what he says and who always does what he promises, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.