

**12-10-23: 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**Pastor Timothy Priewe**

**Text: Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Theme: Comfort, Prepare, Acknowledge, Proclaim!**

In the name of Jesus, the one whom our fathers eagerly waited for. Dear children of God, chosen to be his people.

Is God really listening? More specifically, is he really listening to me? I suppose it would be too much to ask of anyone person to be listening and caring about everyone, but he's God and he promises that he does it, especially for believers. "His ears are attentive to their prayer." So does he follow through? Does he hear the pains of my heart crying out? Does he care about what is going on inside of me like he says he does? And if he does care, why does let things happen to me that leave me the strong impression that either he doesn't care about me anymore or maybe he never did?

Do you have questions like that bouncing in your head? Questions that might even turn into accusations toward God that have been brought on by circumstances that you're not too fond of—whether they're catastrophes like losing your house in a fire, as has happened this week for a family of our congregation, or daily nuisances that come from anxiety or stress or disease or ailments? Sometimes there seems to be no other option than to give voice to our feelings and let it all out.

In a few moments, I'm going to show you verses that are a real-life example of God's prophet doing that very thing, voicing his lament, and it's also a lament inspired by God. The words come from the first chapter of the book of Lamentations, a book written by the prophet Jeremiah. The reason I'm showing you these verses is because they provide the deep-seated context for the words of our sermon text today from Isaiah 40. But let me give you just a few more details before we get into those verses so you can understand where we are at in the timeline. Isaiah the Prophet was a contemporary of King Hezekiah, who was king of the tribes of Judah and lived in Jerusalem where the majestic temple of the Lord was, the place where God chose for his name to dwell. Hezekiah was king of Judah during the time when Sennacherib, king of Assyria came and captured the Northern Tribes of Israel, and then defeated the fortified towns of Judah, and set his sights to destroy Jerusalem, the last city and the capital.

But Sennacherib got arrogant and started mocking the Lord, so the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night and sent the king packing back to Assyria. Jerusalem was delivered for the moment. But then Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah, **“The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord.” (Isaiah 39:5).** That prophecy brings to an end the first chunk of Isaiah, from chapter 1-39. The second chunk of Isaiah starts at chapter 40 where our sermon text picks up. The second part from chapter 40 to the end are Isaiah’s prophesies about God rescuing his people and returning them from captivity in Babylon. But just returning from captivity is too small a thing. At the same time, Isaiah is also prophesying about the coming of Jesus to deliver the people from spiritual captivity to sin, death, and the devil.

Now, finally, let’s get to the verses from Lamentations, which are an important link between the first half of Isaiah and the second half. In the timeline, these verses would come in between Isaiah 39 and 40. These are Jeremiah’s words in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. You can almost picture him standing in the burnt rubble of the city lamenting them,

**“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! ...She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks...there is no one to comfort her. After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile. The roads to Zion mourn, no one comes to her appointed festivals...Her fall was astounding; there was no one to comfort her. ‘Look, LORD, on my affliction, for the enemy has triumphed.’ ‘Look, LORD, and consider, for I am despised...Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me?’ ‘This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears. No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit.’ ... ‘Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her.” See, LORD how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious...People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me. My groans are many and my heart is faint.” (Lamentations 1: 1-4,9,12,16, 17,20-22 NIV 11)**

Those are painful words, words filled with agony over sin and verging on despair. If you’re wondering whether God knows the kind of pain going on inside you, take those words as proof that he does. God is the one

who wrote them through his inspired prophet. What do you notice is the thing the prophet laments over and over again, **“There is no one to comfort me.”**

Dear believer in the throes of pain, take these next words from Isaiah chapter 40 as proof that God not only hears you, but he listens to you, answers you, and cares about you. Anticipating the aftermath of that bitter day of destruction, the first words inspired from prophet Isaiah’s lips are, **“Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1)**. And there, “comfort” is not a noun, but a command to all who hear it. “You (plural) go comfort my people. They are crying out that they need someone to comfort them!” God hears them and attends to their needs by commissioning comforters! **“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 40:2)**.

Remember that Isaiah is prophesying these words ahead of time about things that haven’t happened yet, but are already a done deal in God’s mind. “Your slavery in Babylon, which hasn’t even happened yet, is over! The sins that caused you to be sold there are paid for! And instead of you owing God or him paying you back with the punishment you deserve, he gives you a double measure of mercy and comfort.” These words are not only about Judah’s captivity in Babylon, but are also about the slavery of every sinner to sin, death, and the devil. God has released us through the hard, suffering service of his Chosen Servant, Christ. He has paid for your sins with the precious blood of the Lamb who was stricken and afflicted in your place, and he has exchanged the punishment you deserved with grace and salvation in its place.

Let those tender words that God commanded messengers to speak be the thing that silences every one of your questions or doubts about God. Your God hears you, he cares about you, and has sent people to bring you comfort! He knows what will happen to you, both the good and the bad, and while you might prefer that nothing bad ever happen to you, he knows how he will use those bad circumstances both for your good and for his glory. Maybe it’s to refocus you, or to cause you to rely on him, or let others see you suffer and rely on him. And you may not understand the reasons while it’s happening, but all the while, God is there to comfort you

with the words he wrote down for you. “Comfort, my people!” The word that sums up this first section best is the word God uses twice in a row! **Comfort! Comfort.**

The next section we might sum up with the word: ***Prepare!*** That’s what the voice is calling out, **“In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” (40:3,4)** In ancient times, when a king was going to visit a city, he sent out people before him to prepare the way, to flatten it out and remove the obstacles, to turn a crooked path into a suitable road for the King to travel on. So Isaiah is encouraging a two-fold kind of preparation. Get rid of the obstacles that stand in the way of the King who is coming. If you’ve got a mountain of sin, repent, knock it over, and flatten it out. If you’ve got deep valleys where you’re hiding stuff, repent and fill that emptiness in with the hope of his coming. Make the way ready for him to come to you and remember that it’s not slave labor anymore. Prepare with excitement, because you’re thrilled to meet your king who is bringing back the glory of the LORD that departed from Israel. Isaiah says, **“And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.” (Isaiah 40:5)**

Our third section in these 11 verses we might summarize with the word: ***Acknowledge!*** Here’s what God wants us to acknowledge, **“All people are like grass and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.” (40:6,7)** Think of the fleeting glory of those Old Testament nations. Israel rises to the height of power under David and Solomon and then is divided, and conquered, and destroyed. The Assyrians rise to world power at the Lord’s bidding and are slaughtered just as quickly by him. The Babylonians become God’s next instrument to seize power in the world and very quickly hand it over to the Medes and Persians. The Lord blows on them and they fall. And it’s easy to think that we’re something too, that we’ve accomplished something before God, or even that we control our own destiny, but we don’t. Our achievements and our glory grow like grass and flowers for a little while and then wither and die when the season is over. We need

something else to rely on, something that will last, something that can save. Isaiah proclaims, **“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” (Isaiah 40:8)**

God has sent messengers to proclaim his enduring word throughout the ages. That’s the single word that we’ll use to sum up our fourth section: ***Proclaim!*** Isaiah says, **“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, and do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” (Isaiah 40:9).** The King you were preparing the way for, here he is! It’s from Isaiah’s words we sing our hymn, “Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born! **“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. 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 40:10,11)**

That sentence is jam packed with the gospel! Did you comprehend it all? God rules over all the nations with his mighty arm, but you are his reward. You he carries close to his heart, like a little lamb. You he comforts and cares for. You he listens and attends to. He knows your needs and well provides them, he loves you every day the same and calls you by your name.

Let these truths comfort your soul from top to bottom, and then realize that with the double portion of comfort and grace that God has given to you, you’ve got more than enough to go around. You’re both the recipient of comfort and in turn the messenger of comfort. Just like Paul says, **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3,4).**

Maybe the last time something bad happened to you like getting a bad diagnosis or suffering a great loss, you struggled to see any purpose in it. It may take until the same thing happens to somebody else for you to realize, “I know a little about what they’re going through now. Maybe God was teaching me by experience the comfort I would need to be able to share with someone else in their time of need. If you think about it, it’s a pretty cool cycle God has set up, a cycle of being comforted and then doing the comforting.

As we make our final preparations for Christmas this year, look past the happy greeting cards and Christmas sweaters and don't forget how much people are hurting. Some people are better at hiding it than others, but below the surface, everyone is suffering the effects of sin, and you know a message of unique comfort. Humanly speaking, Christmas is the day that provides us with the most likely opportunity of the year for someone to accept your invitation to come to church. Speak tender comfort to them and invite them to come and hear it with you. Sin has been paid for. Christ has rendered hard service on our behalf. We've received grace upon grace from the God of all comfort. Amen.