

The 2nd Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40: 1-11: *Comfort ye my people*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

**I read a story about a man who worked for the Post Office. His job was to process all the mail that had illegible addresses. One day, a letter came across his desk addressed in shaky handwriting to God. He thought he should open the letter to see what it was about. He read these words: Dear God, I am a 93-year-old widow, living on a very small pension. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had until my next pension check. Next Sunday is Christmas, and I had invited two of my friends over for dinner. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. Can you please help me? Sincerely,
Edna.**

The postal worker was touched. He showed the letter to his fellow workers. Each of them dug into their wallets and came up with a few dollars. By the time he made the rounds, he had collected \$96, which he put into an envelope and sent to the woman. For the rest of the day, all of the postal workers felt a warm glow for the kind thing they had done.

Well, Christmas came and went. A few days later another letter came from Edna addressed to God. All of the workers gathered around while the letter was opened. It read: “Dear God, How can I ever thank you enough for what you did for me? Because of your gift of love, I was able to fix a glorious dinner for my friends. We had a very nice day and I told my friends of your wonderful gift. By the way, there was \$4 missing. I think it must have been those thieves at the Post Office. Sincerely, Edna.”

Well, the folks at the Post Office tried to help. Helping people is what life is all about, isn't it? This brings us to one of the most beautiful passages in the Scriptures. From Isaiah 40:1-11 we read these selected passages:

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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.

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

What wonderful words for this second Sunday in Advent. “Comfort my people.” So, what was the occasion of Isaiah’s letter of comfort to the Israelites? In 587 B.C.E the city of Jerusalem, the great Temple built by Solomon and the Jewish armies had all been destroyed by the Babylonian Army under King Nebuchadnezzar. Ten thousand of Israel’s best and brightest were marched off to Babylon in what is now modern day Iraq. Many of those left behind were imprisoned.

In the course of time, the exiles to Babylon married, built homes, had children and settled into their new land. They might as well accept Babylon as their new home. The prophet Jeremiah told them they would be there for 70 years. So they did the best they could in their new surroundings. Still, they were away from home and from the temple away from everything that gave them their sense of identity. These were years of longing and mourning for what had been. To make it even worse, the prophets made it unmistakably clear to the people that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon were not due to Babylonian strength. They were, instead, a well-deserved punishment from God for the wickedness of the Hebrew people. Their sin was the worship

of a pantheon of false gods, like the God of fertility, wine, war, etc. They are hedging their bets. In other words they broke the covenant. The Hebrew people broke their agreement between God and Abraham. There would be no other gods but Yahweh. They have sinned. They are worshipping clay and wood and metal instead of their Creator. This is the context when Isaiah comes on the scene with this much welcomed message, *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . .”*

Undoubtedly many of you will be exposed in the next few weeks in one form or another to the music of *Messiah*. In our Advent series of classes we are studying the scriptural lyrics found in Handel’s *Messiah* through music. Perhaps you know the history of this splendid piece of music. In the summer of 1741, over the course of only twenty-four days, George Frederic Handel composed the music for *Messiah*. The lyrics, however, a combination of scripture texts from the King James Version of the Bible and *The Book of Common Prayer*, were compiled by Charles Jennens. Here’s what’s important for us to know. The first words sung in *Messiah* are taken directly from this passage of Scripture. The tenor soloist sets the mood. He sings: *“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned . . .”*

That was good news for the Jewish people who, at this point in time, were feeling God forsaken. God has not forsaken them at all, Isaiah says to them. God has forgiven their sins and has reclaimed them as God's own people. My sisters and brothers, this is good news for God's daughters and sons and what good news for all of us who seek to be God's people today.

You may ask yourself this question, "how can God accept me and love me with all my sins?" I would say the answer is found in Hebrews 10:17 "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." Oh, you may say, "my sins are so many and I so shamed I cannot bear for even God to see them." I would say remember Hebrews, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." You may try to explain to God why you are unworthy to receive forgiveness. Just remember Hebrews, our ancient ancestors in the faith and say, "My sins and lawless acts God will remember no more." Then, bow your head in prayer and know that you are truly forgiven because God gave us the great gift of God's son Jesus the Christ. You will be comforted by the words from Hebrews just as the people of Israel were comforted by the words of the prophet Isaiah, "*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for . . .*"Of course, this joyous message is not only for the people of Israel. It is for all us who have

fallen short of what God intends us to be. That means it is a joyous message for all of us.

I had a friend in seminary named Scott. We often studied together. He told me a story about a very memorable experience from his teenage years. It was a Sunday afternoon. His father had purchased a beautiful brand new candy apple red Chevrolet convertible. Scott had a humble little Volkswagen beetle. One day his Dad let him drive his brand new candy apple red Chevrolet convertible to a friend's house. So he took a back road down a twisting rock-lined mountain road. The speed limit was 45 mph on this road, but a friend told Scott that it was impossible to maintain 45 mph on that road and stay in the right lane. Scott knew he could do it. He was wrong. His friend was right. Going around a curve he crossed the line just when another car was coming up the mountain. Scott took out the side of that car from headlight to taillight. He smashed up the front of his father's car so bad that it couldn't be driven. The police came. Scott called home. His father came immediately arriving in the VW. He told Scott to go on to his friend's house in the Volkswagen and he would deal with the police and the car. This story is a metaphor for God's love and forgiveness. You see, Scott's father never mentioned the accident to him again. Years later Scott found out that his father's insurance rates doubled for the next three years because of this accident, but his father never

asked for the money. He never told him the cost. Scott was grateful. In fact, he says to this day, he is still grateful. This event and his father's forgiveness in silence taught him about God's forgiveness.

We've all been there, haven't we? Maybe we haven't wrecked our Dad's new car, but all of us have sinned. All of us have needed forgiveness. There's someone in this church today for whom the greatest comfort I could give you is to utter these three words, "You are forgiven." These are God's words to you this morning regardless of your past: "You are forgiven."

But please remember this: God didn't forgive Israel because they deserved to be forgiven, or because He regarded their offenses lightly. God forgave them simply because He loved them. The same thing could be said about Scott's dad. He was probably quite attached to his candy apple red convertible. There was probably a part of him that wanted to give his son the thrashing of his life. But what would be gained? He knew his son felt bad enough as it was. At that moment he knew his son's greatest need was to be reassured of his father's love. My sisters and brothers in Christ, when a parent gives the gift of love and forgiveness they are reflecting the very nature of God. And, of course, that is the meaning of Christmas. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . ." Christ came to us not because we deserve it, nor

because he approves of everything we are or have done. He came because of his Father's great love for us.

So, here is our challenge during this Season of Advent. Prepare your heart to be opened wide to receive the great gift of God's love and forgiveness.

Now, let's take a few moments and listen to the opening lines of Handel's *Messiah*. Listen as the tenor sets the mood: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned." What good news to all of us who have ever needed to be forgiven. AMEN.