

+ Isaiah 40:1-4 + Comfort My People! + 2nd Sunday in Advent + 7 December 2008 +

The conductor raised his baton. A hush fell over the 700+ people jammed into Neal's Music Hall. They didn't want to miss a single note or syllable in the performance they were about to hear. They weren't disappointed. After a 3-minute overture, the clear voice of a tenor rang out through the hall, intoning words that still touch hearts today—**"Comfort ye my people!"**

It's hard to believe that 266 years have passed since Georg Frederic Handel's *Messiah* debuted in a music hall in Dublin, Ireland. *Messiah* has thrilled audiences ever since. In fact, for many people attending a performance of *Messiah* is as much a part of Christmas as stringing up lights, decorating a tree, or exchanging presents.

It's been 266 years and if the Lord allows another 266 years to pass, people will likely still be attending *Messiah*, but it's not just the music. Yes, Handel's score is some of the most moving music ever recorded, as if he used music to paint the sacred texts, yet the greatness of *Messiah* is in that text drawn directly from Scripture. That is what touches hearts. That is what strengthens troubled spirits. That is what we hear through the prophet Isaiah this morning as the Lord commands his messenger, **COMFORT MY PEOPLE!**

In the verses before our lesson, God allows his prophet to gaze into the future. It isn't pleasant. In fact, there Isaiah sees God's people in the darkest, most difficult days of their lives. They're in captivity under the iron rod of the Babylonians 700 miles from home—the saddest period in Israel's history. God's people feel cut off from him without hope.

To paint the picture, Handel uses a slow and somber cadence, almost like a funeral march. The music transports us across the desert into the gloom of exile in which the people of Israel were living—cut off from their homeland, deprived of their once-favored status and without hope.

Suddenly the music soars when it gets to our text. The slow, somber music moves higher, breaking through the gloom of despair and striking a note of hope. God's spokesman announces a message of almost unbelievable joy for despairing people, whether living in ancient times or right now. **"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."**

Think about this message from God. "Comfort, yes, comfort my people," says your God. The Hebrew word for **"comfort"** gives the idea of not just sympathizing with someone and mourning with them, but encouraging those who grieve with a comfort that raises them up. The Lord is saying, "Speak comfort to those who groan in sorrow. Assure those who are grieving." That's God's message to us.

He emphasizes that when he adds, **"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem."** In Hebrew, God is even more assuring as he commands literally, "Speak to the heart of Jerusalem." God doesn't just speak to the heads of his people, but to their hearts. He speaks a word of peace that eases their troubled hearts and lifts their downcast spirits. **"Comfort, comfort my people... Speak tenderly (to the heart of) Jerusalem."**

What comfort these words speak to our hearts, because they come from the loving heart of our gracious God. The voice speaking here does not pronounce judgment and condemnation, though he has every right. No, he speaks peace to our grieving hearts—the peace of forgiveness. That voice reveals the heart of a Father who pities his children in their time of need. The Lord comforts us by giving us real assurance: **"...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."**

Did you notice how God describes what Israel has done? He uses strong language as he tells his messenger to "loudly and clearly proclaim" his divine assurance. Isaiah is to tell Israel that her **"hard service has been completed..."** or more literally, **"her warfare has ended"**. By nature, all people, including us, declare war with God himself. That's what sin is—open rebellion against the Most High. It's not some insignificant little quarrel with God, as we often like to think, but rebellion against his holy will. The Lord stresses that even further, when he speaks about our **"sin"**. That word has the idea of "leaving the path on which God wants us to walk to follow some other way that leads to destruction" or "missing the mark" of God's perfection.

Notice, though, what the messenger of the Lord is to "loudly and clearly proclaim." He is to tell Israel that her **"hard service has been completed."** God himself has finished the war we declared on him, a war which we could never win. The Lord himself has **"paid for"** the debt of our sin in full, when Jesus declared from the cross, **"It is finished!"** To underscore that, he speaks of how he has provided **"double for all her sins."** God has more than paid for our sins. He's given us double forgiveness in Christ!

Do you usually think of your sins the way God describes them here, as "open rebellion" or "war with God" or as "missing his mark" again and again? Think of things you did this past month or week, things that weren't quite in

harmony with God's will. Were you ever "short" with your spouse or sibling, a little impatient or snippy? Were there days when you didn't give your family the time they needed and deserved? Did you ever neglect your daily devotions or not call on God in prayer as you should have?

We've all been guilty of things like that, haven't we? Still we don't think of them as "waging war with God". No, we find excuses for what we did or didn't do: "I've been under a lot of pressure lately." "I haven't felt well." "I just didn't have the time." Soon our "sins" become "slip-ups," "iniquities" become "lapses," and "warfare" becomes "weakness." We tone down the harshness of what we've done and change our vocabulary to lessen the severity.

...But see your sin for what it really is. See it in God's terms. According to him, sin is warfare. Sin is missing his mark. Accept God's definition for sin and his verdict for what they are. Realize that you can't do anything to repair that relationship with God. Then and only then when we see the seriousness of our sins do we receive the fullness of God's comfort in Christ Jesus, for if there is no sorrow, there can be no comfort. If we are not appalled at what we deserve from God, there can be no soothing words of forgiveness.

Yet God wants us to know his comfort! That comes across so clearly in all he says here. Did you notice, for example, that the Lord calls us, "**my people**"? You and I, who have rebelled against God so many times in so many ways, are still his people! He assures us that this message is from "**your God**"—our God of unlimited, undeserved love.

Can you find a passage in Scripture that speaks in a more comforting way than this passage here? What precious words these are! The Lord shows us his loving, forgiving heart. His loving, forgiving heart pours comfort into our fearful, troubled hearts. He pours out his rich love so fully that our hearts can't hold it all. He tells us, "Come, know my heart! Know how ready I am to forgive. See what I have done for you! See my Son lowly in a manger sharing your human flesh. See my Son never miss the mark of my will for you. See my Son suffer death on the cross to be your sacrifice. See my Son abandon the tomb so your grave will be empty one day. See my Son come again to bring you to be with him forever in heaven. Come, be comforted!"

How do we respond to our Lord's loving heart? There's only one way to respond, isn't there—the way God's messenger spells it out for us in the last part of our text—repentance: "**A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness 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.'**"

Here the Lord uses a picture of road construction. Like a king of old coming to visit a certain town, Christ is coming to his people. He wants them to get ready for his coming, to prepare the way on which he will travel.

God is specific about the road he wants his people to build. He wants a road that is straight and smooth, easy for him to come to us. If there are valleys or low spots, they should be filled. If there are hills or mountains in the way, they should be leveled. The road described is not a road across the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. It's not on any map. No, God speaks of the road into our hearts. He wants us by faith to remove any obstructions that might keep him out. He wants a straight and smooth road to our hearts.

Is there some "construction" you and I, as believers, have to do before our Lord can come to us anew this Christmas? Are there concerns about the things of this world we may have to level out so they won't block the Savior's way? Do we have to straighten out the way to our hearts by setting aside the sidetracking, secular interests of this season? Do we need to put out a "Road Improvement Ahead" sign for the next couple weeks? We need not resist or resent that. A Christian's life is often like the beginning of Handel's *Messiah*—somber, sad, almost like a funeral march because of sin. Then the high, clear notes of "**comfort**" pierce through the gloom and dispel the sadness with forgiveness. That comfort soon leads to joy as we prepare for the Lord's coming, rejoicing in his comfort.

During this Advent season, we're filled with joy as we again look back at the first coming of our Savior as a little child. What joy we have, knowing the Lord laid aside his glory and power to be born in humility that he might serve as our Savior from sin. Then we look ahead with growing, joy-filled anticipation to the time when Christ will come again to bring that comfort of his love and forgiveness in full to his people.

This joy-filled anticipation shows itself in the ways we offer our whole lives, all that we are and have, to the Lord. He has given to each his comfort and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. That joy of forgiveness then shows itself as we bring special gifts of our time. It shows itself as we bring special gifts of our talents. It even shows itself as we bring special gifts of our treasures to the Lord.

Reflect on the comfort God speaks to you in Jesus. Then respond to his assurance of pardon by receiving him anew through repentance and faith and by offering him gifts that show your delight. May Jesus, our Advent King, fill your heart with true comfort and delight this Advent season. Amen.