

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Third Sunday in Advent, December 11, 2011

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 61, 69:3, 63, 386, 65, 1-4.

Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-10, 2 Peter 3:8-14, Matthew 3:1-12.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 40:1-2.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

I am sure that every one of you has received words and actions of comfort at times in your lives. Someone hugged you, held your hand, or just sat with you, and told you that things will get better, that things will be OK, that things will turn out all right.

Comfort is one of those things that it seems we need often, and that we need repeatedly. No one lives who will never need comfort.

What will give you the most comfort? Will you turn to the poetry or other words or music of the unbelieving world? Will you vainly turn to alcohol or other drugs trying to find comfort? Will you turn to friends and neighbors who do not believe as you do, who do not believe that Jesus Christ came to pay for all your sins and to give eternal life in heaven to you? To the child of God such sources that people turn to for comfort will really seem foolish or outrageous, as if they can provide any real comfort at all.

The fact that you are here reading this sermon suggests that you know where we find comfort and to whom we can turn for comfort. The child of God knows, as you have learned, that

REAL COMFORT COMES FROM GOD

- 1. We find genuine comfort in what God says to us in his Word.**
- 2. The greatest possible comfort is knowing that *“sin has been paid for.”***

There are many reasons we need comfort. Pain, illness, and all kinds of hurts: physical, emotional, spiritual hurts. At the root of all of them is sin. Sin is the reason mankind needs comfort.

God’s messengers are to do more than point out the sinfulness of mankind. They are also to tell what God has done about that sinfulness of mankind. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is words of comfort.

The Gospel means nothing if the Law has not been preached. We must learn from the Law that our sins condemn us to eternal damnation. We must learn from the Law of God that we cannot earn our salvation and deserve only temporal death and eternal punishment. The Gospel then is words of comfort telling us that the ***“hard service has been completed.”***

God says ***“Comfort, comfort my people.... 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.”***

This chapter begins with the deliverance of God’s people from Babylon, but God stretched the prophet’s vision further into the future. Isaiah is looking forward to the final comfort that God would send to his people, and to all mankind.

Not just once, “Comfort” but twice, ***“Comfort, comfort.”*** So the Lord begins with a single repeated command. The command comes from God, and God himself directed it toward his messengers, who will announce the good news of his love. God intends this comfort for his people. He claims them, and calls them ***“my people.”*** After all their unfaithfulness, all their rebellion, all their sins, they are still his people. God remains their God, faithful and full of grace, as he promised to be, for example, in Exodus 34:6-7: ***“The LORD,***

the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin”

This chapter in Isaiah is poetry in the Hebrew and that poetry is reflected in the way the New International Version translation is displayed on the page.

The book of Isaiah, 66 chapters long, is filled with prophecy. It has long been recognized as having two distinct parts, with the first 39 chapters closely tied to history in Isaiah’s time. Beginning with chapter 40, the book of the prophet Isaiah especially looks forward, and the highlight of what it looks forward to is the Savior from sin, the promised Messiah who will crush the head of Satan.

Right away we hear God’s words: ***“Comfort, comfort my people.”*** Who should comfort them? Isaiah? Of course, but not only Isaiah. The command extends to more than just one person. In the Old Testament, God’s message of comfort came through the prophets; in the New Testament, through the evangelists and the apostles. All who share the gospel carry out God’s command to comfort his people. This command applies to all who serve as public ministers of God and to all believers who share the gospel. Never forget that all believers share the important task of bringing God’s comfort to those who need it. Christ himself commanded his followers in Matthew 28:19-20: ***“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”***

The second verse introduces us to the method by which the comfort was to be shared, ***“Speak.”*** Through the means of human language, God gives his comfort to humans. The process is simple. The comfort originates with God, who reveals it in human language so that it can be extended to others by the same vehicle or means, namely, human language. The gospel comes in words, which are the means through which God extends his grace and mercy. ***“Speak tenderly,”*** God directs. Speak to the heart and proclaim, he tells his children. Use your voice.

What is the message? God tells us exactly the content of the words he wants spoken. Here we see three distinct ideas as the content of the message of comfort. First, the hard service of God’s people is completed. Second, their sins have been paid for, and third, God’s people have received abundant blessings from the Lord. Each of these statements announces an action that has already taken place. It’s done, even though all these things lie in the future. For the Jews in Isaiah’s time, we know that they would be carried away as captives into Babylon. For the Jews in Isaiah’s time, we know that they would be allowed to return to Jerusalem. For the Jews in Isaiah’s time Jesus, the one who would come to save people from their sins had not yet entered this world. But the events God announced were so certain that God speaks as if they had already been completed. No doubt exists about this future. You see, God doesn’t just say something and not carry it out. He does what he says he will do! ***“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.”***

The word ***“hard service”*** refers to military service and can also mean difficulty and trials. On the one hand, the Promise means that the Babylonian captivity has come to end. The end of the Babylonian captivity brought comfort to God’s people. On the other hand, sin and death have forced chains of bondage upon every sinner. Every sinner longs for the announcement that he or she is free from such bondage. Because Jesus has come, we are released from death. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are no longer locked in the dungeon because of God’s anger and anticipating an eternity of punishment in hell. Our hard service is completed, not because we have achieved release by our own effort or because we have done our time and satisfied the law. Our bondage is over because God has achieved our release through his Son, the Messiah.

The second part of the sentence, ***“that her sin has been paid for,”*** announces the forgiveness of sins. The debt caused by every sinful, wicked thought and word and deed committed by God’s people and by all humanity has been paid off. This does not mean that the 70 years of Judah’s captivity have been enough to pay the debt that Judah’s sins created. The nation of Judah could not atone for her own guilt or for the guilt of any other nation or people. But her sins have been paid for. If Judah could not pay the debt, how would her sins be paid for? The answer provides the reason why Isaiah’s Prophecy remains so important. Someone will come to pay for her sins. In chapter 53, Isaiah clearly describes how this will happen. The sins of Judah and all the world

will be paid for by the vicarious, substitutionary, suffering and death of the Servant of the Lord, God's only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Speaking of the future so surely as if it has already happened, we read ***"The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*** Isaiah 53:6.

The third part of the sentence ***"that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins"*** is twice as long as the other two parts and underscores the grace of God. Isaiah tells us that God's people receive a double portion from the hand of the Lord. The God of the covenant, Jehovah, the Savior-God, has and holds these blessings. They belong to the Lord. The blessings originate in the heart of God. He possesses them, and he dispenses them to his people. The people only receive them from the Lord's hand, and from his hand alone. The people do not deserve these blessings. They cannot be earned either by sacrifice or by suffering. Instead, God distributes them by grace, free and undeserved love.

He offers a double portion. The word double simply means that God's blessings are ample, abundant, and beyond expectations. The sins of God's people have deserved punishment, but God has offered forgiveness and eternal life instead of punishment. The apostle Paul understood the meaning of this idea when he wrote, also by inspiration of God, ***"But where sin increased, grace increased all the more"*** Romans 5:20

This verse in Isaiah not only identifies the content of the message of God's messengers; these words also provide a road map to follow through the remaining chapters of Isaiah's prophecy. The 27 chapters of the last part of Isaiah can be divided into three nine-chapter sections. The first section (chapters 40-48) focuses on the release of God's people from their captivity in Babylon and develops the thought that ***"her hard service has been completed."*** The second section (chapters 49-57) announces the coming of the Great Servant of the Lord, who will be pierced and crushed for the sins of the people. How appropriate that the center of this section and the center of the entire last portion of the prophecy is the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. The sins of the people have ***"been paid for"*** completely in the Redeemer. Finally, the last section (chapters 58-66) takes us to the grand results of the Messiah's great work. God's people receive magnificent blessings – a double portion – from God because of the suffering and death of the Savior.

God's words were backed up and followed up with action. John's Gospel assures us: ***"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*** John 3:16 That Son of God came to earth, and in this Advent season we prepare again for the celebration of his coming.

We rejoice with the hymn writer:

“Comfort my desponding heart:
Thou my Strength and Refuge art.
I am weak, and cunningly
Satan lays his snares for me.
“Bruise for me the Serpent's head,
That, set free from doubt and dread,
I may cleave to Thee in faith,
Safely kept through life and death,
“And when Thou dost come again
As a glorious King to reign,
I with joy may see Thy face,
Freely ransomed by Thy grace. Amen.” (The Lutheran Hymnal, 91: 7-9)