

### ***Ready Comfort***

In the name of him who reveals to us the glory of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament lesson marks the turning point in the book of the prophet Isaiah. For the first 39 chapters, the Word of the Lord Isaiah proclaims and records for posterity is mostly bad news for God's people: lots of dire warnings of wrath and judgment which will soon be directed against them on account of their constant sin and rebellion. But beginning in the fortieth chapter, where today's text appears, and indeed continuing pretty much to the end of the book, the Lord's word through the prophet practically overflows with grace and mercy, offering sweet words of comfort, hope, and promises of good things to come for his all too often wayward children. And after all that hard to hear negative stuff he'd been throwing at them in the first 39 chapters, you'd think that Isaiah's kinder, gentler words would have been eagerly received by God's people. But that would be wrong. No, in the life and times of the prophet anyway, the message of comfort we heard this morning fell almost entirely on deaf ears.

Why was that? It's because you don't need a band aid until you've been cut. You don't need a hand up until you've fallen down. You don't need a hug until you've become depressed. A pastor friend of mine would say it this way: you don't really need a drink until you're completely frustrated (he seems to get frustrated a lot). And don't misunderstand me: hugs and even drinks are welcome under other circumstances; but I'm talking about those times when they are especially helpful in reviving sagging spirits.

Isaiah's comforting message of hope fell flat because the people of Judah to whom he was speaking had not yet experienced the judgment of God he warned them was coming. The way they saw it, everything was going along fine and dandy. The harvests were abundant, the economy was booming, no big threats from enemies loomed on the horizon. Life was good. Who cares about promises of good times to come when you're already enjoying them? At one point in his own ministry, Jesus commented about how hard it is for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God. Easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, he said. Why? It's because they've got no problems. They see all their needs being met. They're comfortable. What do they need God for?

No, it's hardship, it's trouble, it's need, pain, worry, and discomfort – it's in the times when we face these that we seek the Lord for relief from our afflictions. These are the times too that we are forced to consider our sins. I mean, in seeking a renewed relationship with the Lord, we have to face the truth about ourselves that damaged and destroyed the relationship in the first place. If it's broken, if it's not as it should be, the fault lies with you, not with the Lord. Thus it is that when you feel the Lord's hand of discipline heavily upon you that you are led to repentance. And therefore we see that it really is a mercy when the Lord brings trouble and hardship into your life. He does it so that you will repent and live. Without it, you might be lost forever.

But it's not like the Lord enjoys bringing troubles upon us. He'd much rather that we heed his warnings and turn back to him without his having to apply the rod. Certainly we see this with the prophecies of Isaiah. It was more than 100 years after the prophet was dead and buried that the Lord acted on the punishment he threatened to bring against the nation of Judah. As Peter says in today's Epistle, he's patient. He wants to allow plenty of time for people to come to repentance. But he can't do that forever.

And so finally came the day when he did bring his judgment on Judah. To be specific, The Lord had warned his people through Isaiah about the big one: the time we call the Babylonian Exile, when the nation of Judah was completely destroyed, its cities were leveled, and the handful of survivors were sold as slaves and scattered. The only ones who were spared were those who had already been taken captive and resettled in penal colonies in distant Babylon several years earlier – about 50,000 people in all. They sat on the sidelines and watched in horror as their homeland was wiped out and all of their countrymen were killed or enslaved. Now, before that happened, the thing they hoped for most was that one day they might be allowed to return to their own country. That was their dream. But when the nation was destroyed, there was no country left for them to go back to. The Babylonians had redrawn the map. There was no nation of Judah on it anymore. Not that they could go back anyway. As long as the Babylonian Empire stood, they had to stay where they were in captivity. To them the situation had become completely hopeless. They could not have imagined anything worse. They were in utter despair.

But it is precisely for these who were in exile that Isaiah had recorded the words of today's text. "Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Yes, the judgment of God had to fall against those who remained consistently and stubbornly unrepentant. They got what they deserved. But the Lord had prepared in advance words of ready comfort for those who were made ready to receive them – namely, the exiles. Their having been yanked out of their homes, robbed of their possessions, carried off to a foreign land, and made to stay in comparative squalor had brought them to reconsider their relationship with the Lord and ultimately to repentance. Thus they lived while so many of their countrymen who had remained in relative peace and prosperity did not.

And now, through Isaiah, the Lord is telling them that they have been forgiven. More than that, as the prophecy continues, he speaks of their restoration. "I'm coming to you", the Lord says. "Make ready the way. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." He's speaking of the end of the exile, when the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, and the Persian king, Cyrus, did exactly what God had promised: he released the exiles from their captivity and allowed them to return to their homeland. They redrew the maps once again, putting Judah back where it belonged. The nation that had been effectively dead for many decades came back to life.

All of which, it needs to be stressed, is a prophetic foreshadow of a much greater deliverance God had planned: that which was worked by Jesus our Savior who for us was punished and thereby conquered sin and death. This is why John the Baptizer can use the words of Isaiah to refer to himself as the voice in the wilderness calling people to repent and to make ready the way of the Lord. He has words of ready comfort to speak to those even in our day who are ready to receive them.

The question is: are you ready? Here's my concern: Advent is a penitential season, a time of preparation for the coming of the Lord. It's a time for us to reflect deeply and introspectively on the way we've been living our lives outside of God's design, how we've been rebelling against the Lord, and dealing with others with something less than the perfect love that God requires. It's a time for us to consider our many sins and the very reason God had to send his Son to assume our flesh in order to suffer and die for us and for our salvation. Is that what you're doing?

Too often, especially in our culture, the tendency is to leap ahead and spend a whole month celebrating Christmas. December can be a frenzy of buying, feasting, partying, and indulging ourselves in every excess imaginable. And as Americans, we can do it better than just about anyone else in the world. Hey, times are good.

My concern is that maybe they're too good. Those who are comfortable don't care about being comforted. The Lord's true ready comfort, the forgiveness and peace he gives in Jesus Christ, can only be fully appreciated by those who through repentance are made ready for it. Now, I'm not suggesting that we should go ask the Lord to send us some especially nasty affliction to help us adjust our attitudes. Such things come to each of us in due time. Some of you are dealing with such things right now. But most of us aren't; not at the moment anyway.

But the truth is that the Lord would rather we come to repentance without his having to apply the rod. He prefers that each day we examine ourselves in light of his holy Law, recognize our sins and the brokenness of our relationship with him, and that we seek his forgiveness for the sake of Jesus our Savior. He wants us to walk with him in the glory and light of his love for us.

With this in mind, what I'm suggesting is that we use this season of Advent for what's intended. I'm suggesting that we take the time to do some real soul searching, that we identify and confess our sins, turning from them with regret and repentant hearts, even going so far as to go after some of those secret sins and sacred cows that we give ourselves permission to keep in our lives because ... well, because we cherish them and don't want to give them up. I'm suggesting that we might even want to apply some ascetic disciplines: a little more time spent in prayer and Bible study meditating on the Word of God and a little less time spent on personal pleasures, a little fasting instead of feasting, a little self denial instead of self indulgence, a little less spending on me and my loved ones and more spent on people who have genuine needs – those who lack basic necessities, and even more, those who don't know the saving truth of the Gospel. Such disciplines aren't for the purpose of earning merit before God or anything like that., of course; but rather for the purpose of making ourselves a little less comfortable with our lives in this sinful world and therefore more ready to receive the true comfort God gives to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. May our gracious God thus prepare us for our Savior's coming and the lasting comfort and peace he brings. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***