

12.6.20**The Comfort of God****Isaiah 40.1-11**

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When you hear the word “comfort” what comes to mind for you? Some of us think of comfort food; food that has a nostalgic or sentimental value and often has a lot of calories and carbs, is simple to make or reminds us of a person who used to make it. Cookies, sweet breads, macaroni and cheese, pizza, a grilled cheese and tomato soup are some examples of comfort food.

Some of us may think of a comforter or blanket on a cold night, when you don’t feel well, or a parent bundling up a child, or even in a medical setting, we all can appreciate the comfort of a soft, warm blanket.

When do we need comfort? When we’re grieving, hurting, and sick, when we’re feeling sad, concerned about our health and our mortality. When we’re feeling vulnerable, lonely, or uncertain; when it seems like God is hidden, silent, or absent. When we’re going through or have been through a traumatic experience. These are all times we can use comfort and reassurance. Have you ever felt that way? Some of us may feel that way today. I think there are a lot of people who need comfort. It’s helpful to know where we can find comfort for ourselves. We also want to be able to share and extend comfort to others.

Today’s scripture from Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV) is written to people who are desperately in need of comfort. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah speak of judgment and condemnation to the proud, unfaithful, rebellious inhabitants of Jerusalem. But in chapter 40 the tone shifts dramatically from criticism to comfort. It’s important to understand a significant amount of time passes between the events of chapter 39 and chapter 40. Israel had been exiled to Babylon from 597- 538 BC (approximately 60 years). It was a terrible time. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed; the treasury had been ransacked; the line of kings descended from David had ended. The priesthood had stopped functioning. The ruined land was under foreign domination. It appeared God had stopped acting on behalf of the people. It makes what we’ve been living through in 2020 seem not nearly as bad. But the first words of chapter 40 announce comfort to the exiles. The sufferings of God’s people in Babylon, (foretold in

Isaiah 39:6-7), are over. God hasn't forgotten them. God hasn't forgotten us either.
Listen to Isaiah 40:1-11 (KJV),

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

2 Speak ye comfortably (literally, "to the heart") to Jerusalem, and cry unto her,

That her **warfare** is accomplished,

That her **iniquity** is pardoned:

For she hath received of the LORD's hand **double for all her sins**.

3 The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,

Prepare ye **the way of the LORD**,

Make straight in the desert a highway **for our God**.

4 Every valley shall be exalted,

And every mountain and hill shall be made low:

And the crooked shall be made straight,

And the rough places plain:

5 **And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,**

And all flesh **shall see it together**:

For the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

6 The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry?

All flesh is grass,

And all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field:

7 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:

Because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it:

Surely the people is grass.

8 The grass withereth, the flower fadeth:

But the word of our God shall stand for ever.

9 O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain;

O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength;

Lift it up, be not afraid; Say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**

10 **Behold, the Lord GOD will come** with strong hand,

And his arm shall rule for him: Behold, his reward is with him,

And his work before him.

11 He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
He shall gather the lambs with his arm,
And carry them in his bosom,
And shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Isaiah 40:1-11 begins with comfort. “*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.*” The Hebrew word is *naham*. It’s a deeply emotional word, overflowing with feelings of pity and concern. “*Speak ye comfortably*” is literally, “*to the heart.*” The prophet was preaching to an audience that had experienced trauma and whose relationship with God had been deeply wounded as a result. For these people God’s hiddenness was far more real than God’s presence. That is something many of us can relate to – having a time in our life where God seems hidden, absent, or silent and we don’t know what to think or believe any more and it’s hard to be hopeful. After Jerusalem’s destruction, the looting and burning of the royal house and treasuries, and being taken away to live in exile in Babylon for decades, Isaiah 40 speaks a stunning word of return and restoration. Jerusalem has “*served her term and paid the penalty.*” When we sin, there are always consequences, both foreseen and unforeseen. Isaiah had cried out against the spiritual insensitivity of his generation and warned of devastating punishment. But God’s love for the people has never weakened. Isaiah speaks directly to the shaken survivors of the destruction by the Babylonians to comfort and console them. God remains committed to His own. One of the things this scripture invites us to do is trust and believe that God is present even when we can’t immediately see where or how.

In addition to comfort, Isaiah 40:1-11 describes several other attributes of God that are comforting to remember when we feel God is hidden or silent. The next is God’s glory. Isaiah (40:3–5) says the time will come when **the glory of God** will be revealed in such an unmistakable way that all people “**shall see it together.**” The implication of this imagery is that God has abandoned Jerusalem, leaving it to the hands of the Babylonians (see Ezekiel 10). **The highway Isaiah describes is not for the exiles, it’s for God.** Verses 3-5 seek to assure the hearers that the time of God’s long absence from Jerusalem has come to an end. God will return to the holy city and again be accessible: “***the glory of the Lord shall be revealed***” (verse 5). The glory of the Lord needs to be revealed because, from the exiles’ perspective, it’s been hidden,

and a hidden God is a terrifying God. When we feel that God is hidden, absent, or silent and there is no one there who cares, hears, or responds it's a very empty, hollow feeling. Isaiah 40:1-11 seeks to convince its audience that the season of God's hiddenness has come to an end.

Hundreds of years later, this prophecy was seen in a new way in the ministry of John the Baptist who called Israel to repentance in preparation for the glorious appearance of the Messiah. Some people responded to John's preaching and confessed their sins and sought to live in a way that reflected God's desire for humility, truth, and justice, others did not. Regardless of how people responded then or now, **the glory of God is not dependent upon human belief or response**. C.S. Lewis, wrote in *The Problem of Pain*, "A man can no more diminish **God's glory** by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word, 'darkness' on the walls of his cell." Theologian Alfred North Whitehead humbly noted, "Apart from God every activity is merely a passing whiff of insignificance." It's comforting to know God's glory cannot be altered or diminished, it's simply there like the sun in the sky each day.

With all that changes in our life and the world, it's comforting to remember not only God's glory, but God's eternal nature (40:6–9, 28). Isaiah says God's word stands forever, unlike people and our words. Isaiah 40:28 declares, "**The Lord is the everlasting God.**" There is a vast difference between God who is eternal and people who are like grass and flowers which are on earth very briefly. Human beings like to think we're so smart, powerful, and important. **Ecclesiastes 5:2** reminds us that humility and reverence are the right attitudes when we think of God's eternal nature, "**Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.**" Saint Augustine (354-430) wrote, "**God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand you have failed.**" There is a level of mystery to God's eternal nature that we will never fully comprehend, yet the eternal nature of God gives us a sense of solidness in life's ever-changing sea.

It's comforting to know in times of stress and change when God seems hidden, absent, or silent that **God's glory cannot be altered or diminished** and **God's eternal nature** – of grace, mercy, and steadfast love never changes. **Isaiah 40:1-11 begins**

with God's comfort and ends with an image of tenderness and comfort, *"he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."* The closeness of shepherd and sheep was an image the people of biblical times could readily identify with because they lived it and saw it all around. God is **powerful and gentle** like a shepherd **able to comfort as well as defend**. Power and gentleness can go together.

God is gentle and we can draw near and be welcomed, or we can choose to pull away from the Lord and go our own way. However, as Augustine noted, *"Remember this. When people choose to withdraw far from a fire, the fire continues to give warmth, but they grow cold. When people choose to withdraw far from light, the light continues to be bright in itself but they are in darkness. This is also the case when people withdraw from God."* Christian mystic **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968) emphasized that **"True happiness is not found in any other reward than that of being united with God."**

Isaiah 40 declares God's comfort, glory, eternal nature, and tenderness.

As I mentioned earlier, the message of Zion in Isaiah 40 **resembles the message given by John the Baptist**: In his day John the Baptist came saying, *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said"* (John 1:23). John says, "Here is your God!" (Isaiah 40:9b) with the words, **"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29)**. In the fourth Gospel Jesus is both the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11-18). The former word of promise in Isaiah, meets its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Yet the comfort of God extends even beyond the life of Christ.

In his final days, Jesus promised that he would send **the Comforter**, the Holy Spirit. In **John 14:15-18** in the (King James Version) Jesus declares, *"15 If ye love me, keep my commandments. 16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; 17 Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. 18 I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you."*

What a promise, the Lord will not leave us comfortless, and as Christ followers we're called to share God's comfort with others in word and deed.

Early in Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is confronted by the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley who warns Scrooge of the terrible fate that awaits him because of his greedy, selfish, uncaring life. It is a terrifying, soul-shaking encounter for Scrooge who pleads with Marley, "*Old Jacob Marley, tell me more! Speak comfort to me, Jacob!*" The Ghost replies "*I have none to give.*" What a terrible thing to have no comfort to give.

Isaiah says God comes to comfort, restore, and redeem God's people. John the Baptist quoted Isaiah and tried to help people prepare their hearts and lives for the coming of Christ by turning from their selfish and sinful ways. Jesus comes as the embodiment of God's comfort and love. He promises that he will not leave us alone but when he departs the Comforter, the Holy Spirit will come and be with us. God calls us to comfort one another, as Paul writes in **Galatians 6:2**, "***Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.***" It's important to remember, as the British preacher Dr. John Henry Jowett (1863-1923) said, "***God does not comfort us to make us comfortable only, but to make us comforters.***"

Being a comforter is part of the calling of every Christian. **How are you providing and sharing the comfort of God in your circle of relationships?** Comfort doesn't take the pain away, but it pulls up a chair, and sits with us so we have more than pain and sorrow in our heart. Comfort helps us remember pain isn't all there is. **Psalms 34:18** (NIV) reminds us, "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*"

One reason why living through a pandemic is difficult is because at a time when we all could use them some of the ways we give and receive comfort, holding a hand, giving a hug, sharing in a close and unhurried conversation, praying together, are not possible in the same way they were before. Yet even when we are hurting and missing many people and experiences ourselves, we're called to be comforters, to speak tenderly, whether on the phone or online, on a walk or at a distance, we can be with someone else who is brokenhearted or crushed in spirit. We can be that blanket of God's comfort for them. In the grace of God, it is often when we are giving of ourselves

and seeking to comfort others that we also experience God's presence with us in a way that strengthens, encourages, and comforts us. One of my favorite images of the Comfort of God that continues the imagery of Isaiah 40 and John 10 is found in **Revelation 7:17**, *"The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* May the comfort of God be with you this day and always, and may you share the comfort of God with others.

Blessing: 2 Corinthians 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies **and God of all comfort,**" and "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself & God our Father, who loved **us & through grace gave us eternal comfort & good hope, comfort your hearts & strengthen them in every good work & word.**" 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is a "comfort food" you enjoy? Have you ever at any age had a favorite blanket or quilt? What made it special?
2. When you've been in a time when you needed comfort, what helped you and why did it make a difference?
3. Look at or read aloud Isaiah 40:1-11. What word or phrase speaks to you or resonates with you the most at this moment?
4. Has there been a time in your life, like for the exiles in Babylon, when God seemed hidden, absent, or silent? What was going on? If that feeling changed, how did the change take place?
5. Isaiah declares God's comfort, glory, eternal nature, and tenderness. Which of those speaks to your heart and spirit the most right now? Why?
6. Through Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit we see the long, strong thread of God's comfort. Dr. John Henry J. H. Jowett said, *"God does not comfort us to make us comfortable only, but to make us comforters."* How are you answering the call as a Christ follower to be a comforter?