



Comfort!

Isaiah 40:1-8

Grace Church | 4.17.22

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the exclamation point of all human history. Because we live on the other side of the first Good Friday, we often say that the cross is the high point of History. But in fact, without the resurrection the cross remains a question mark. All who trusted Jesus left Calvary with the question "has God been defeated?". The empty tomb of Jesus Christ is the exclamatory negative answer.

But what does the empty tomb really exclaim? What is the heart of the sentence that it punctuates? It's my job this morning to show you convincingly from Isaiah chapter 40 that the real message of the Resurrection can be summed up with one word: comfort! When the three faithful women found no one in the tomb, when the disciples watched the risen Jesus pass through the walls and touched him in his side, and when on the road to Emmaus revealed himself to the curious travelers, none of them heard a message of judgment. Peter didn't leave his breakfast with his very much alive Rabbi with his head held low. All who truly see and believe in the resurrection are headed for embrace. Resurrection Sunday is about comfort. And who here is not in need of a warm, comforting embrace?

So here is my outline today, on the Lord's Day.

1. Comfort is coming for you,
2. Get ready, because you can't stop its glory.
3. It will have the last say.

Comfort is coming for you (1-2).

Here in Isaiah 40, we find the turning of a page in this prophetic book. For 39 chapters, The prophet Isaiah has been speaking to the nation of Israel in their current moment. And that moment has not looked good for them. The primary message of Isaiah 1-39 is that of God's impending judgment. Because Israel has forsaken God in idolatry and wickedness, he has sent Isaiah to confront them. We find Isaiah's message summarized in 6:8-9, as God calls him to his prophetic task:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people:



'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Notice the dual nature there in verse 9, the phrase "keep on" is repeated for emphasis. Isaiah is to continue on in bringing the Lord's confrontation to his people, even though he knows that the people will not see and not listen. The hardness of heart is shown expressly in the immediate context, when in chapter 39 Isaiah prophesies directly to King Hezekiah that the Babylonians are coming soon to take away the people into exile. The catch is that that impending judgment is still a generation away. It's Hezekiah's sons who will be taken into Babylon, not Hezekiah himself. So what does Hezekiah say? 39:8 tells us:

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good. For he thought, There will be peace and security in my days.

In other words, he says "not my problem." So what happens? Babylon comes, just as God promised. And so chapter 40 flips the script. No longer is Isaiah speaking to Israel concerning their current circumstances, but he is looking into the future to speak to them when the discipline of God has caught up to them. In Babylon, everyday the Israelites were faced with mockery against Yahweh their God. In their heart, they believed their exile was not just due to their sin, but because God himself had abandoned them. Their refrain in Babylon is expressed in 40:27,

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God?

Israel feels that God has failed. Their vision of God is far too small. I imagine the disciples felt very similarly as they watched Jesus suffer and die alone, a criminal death, a public spectacle of shame. I imagine they felt abandoned by God, cast again into exile, as they watched the stone roll over the mouth of the grave of Joseph of Arimathea. God had failed them, again.

And I imagine that here today, many of us feel the same. Where is God? We are in Babylon, surrounded on all sides by unholy temples. We profess to live in a Christian society, but we can't escape loneliness, futility, depression, consumerism, or greed. Many of our days feel as dark as Holy Saturday. And not only that, but we live among people, oftentimes including ourselves, who have hardened our hearts to the confrontation of God. Like Hezekiah, we say "not my problem". We keep on hearing, but do not understand, keep on seeing but do not perceive. Is God dead?

So here comes the message God gives to Isaiah and to his people to say to one another, in **verse 1**. Right away we noticed the emphasis with the dual repetition: comfort, comfort. There is no mistaking what's going on here, this is a new age for Israel. The time of discipline has passed, now comes the comfort. This comfort is also deeply personal. Despite their years of sin and rebellion that led them into exile, they are still "my people" to God, and God is still "your God" to them. Not only that, they are still described as "Jerusalem", even though their current state is thousands of miles away and Jerusalem's walls are broken. Jerusalem means "city of peace", and although there are in exile because of war, their God is still their peace. God's covenant is a covenant of comfort



that is sustained regardless of the failure of the people. Notice too the comfort is ongoing. The word “says” is an imperfect tense, most literally as “keeps saying”. This is a message that is not meant to be echoed once but continually.

The feel of God’s comfort is very clear in **verse 2**. Speak tenderly is literally translated as “speak to the heart.” This is not a cold and distant comfort from God, but it is meant to gently persuade. To speak to the heart is to speak to your personal needs, to the places that hurt and feel broken. God does not issue cold comforts from the back row, in Christ he comes and speaks tenderly, softly, right to our deepest emotions and needs. This comfort is also a comfort that is meant to be expressed. That’s why verse 2 is instructing the messenger to cry out, to sound out loud the comfort. You may feel God is silent, but everywhere he is crying out. What is this message of comfort? At least three things.

First, that warfare has ended. This word warfare is translated in different ways, but the best way to render it is some form of "hard service". Think about the trials of war: soldiers are taken from their homes and sent to a far away place, oftentimes to fight in a battle they have no personal stake in. The end of warfare in this context is the feeling when a soldier comes home. You've all seen the videos, or even felt it first hand, when those in the battlefield return home safely, the joy is almost inexpressible. The comfort of home moves discharged soldiers to tears. The call of God on Easter is to return home, that there is a day of homecoming headed your way, when the hard service of this world is over.

Secondly, the pardoning of iniquity. Even in returning home, soldiers carry heavy burdens. Israel eventually would return home from exile to Jerusalem, but would they carry with them the same sin that sent them to exile in the first place? Here we see the great mercy and grace of God. He is under no obligation to end the exile that they have inflicted on themselves, that is pure Mercy. But he is also under no obligation to pardon and forgive the sin that brought them there. That is pure grace, undeserved favor. Can I remind you of something? If you are in Christ, the comfort that God offers today is not just that eventually your self-inflicted exile will end, but that you will not have to carry any longer the burden of sin that sent you there to begin with.

Thirdly, the receiving of double for all sins. There are perhaps two ways to read this: first, that the grace of God is greater, or double, and more extravagant than the sin of his people. That is certainly a powerful truth. The second way to read this, and I think the most clear upon examination of the text, is that the word "double" refers not to extravagance, but to completion. We see an example of this in Exodus 22, where in God’s law a thief must pay both what is due and also a fine in order to complete the payment. God has paid back the price of sin doubly: not only has he taken our unrighteousness, he has given us his. There is nothing left to pay! God is saying to his people: "my discipline is complete." This brings us to the primary good news of comfort for those in exile: God's discipline is for a purpose. There is one payment for sin, and that payment is sure and final. The comfort for God's people is not that they have suffered long enough to pay for their past sins. The comfort for God's people is that they have received from the Lord a payment of Grace for their sins.



Friends, let me speak this as clearly as I can. If you are not in Christ, God is using the questions and pain of this world to wake you up and draw you to himself. But if you are in Christ, God is not angry with you. He is not continually paying off your sins by allowing you to suffer. He has you in exile now, but be comforted. Your warfare is ended, your iniquity is parted, you may not feel the full weight of it now, but the empty tomb of Jesus Christ is the evidence. Comfort is coming for you as surely as the sun rises.

Comfort is coming for you. **Get ready, because you can't stop its glory (3-5).**

Life is a series of peaks and valleys. Oftentimes we struggle to feel the comfort of God because we are surrounded by our own circumstances: up, down, up down. One day: joy, elation. The next: despair, darkness. This was Israel. God is speaking tenderly to them, with amazing promises that their exile is not forever and their sin is no more—but how can they be sure? They are surrounded by Babylon. It's tumultuous. Similarly: how is it that we *receive* comfort from God when we live in such varying circumstances? That is the question God is answering in **verses 3-5**. Another, unnamed, voice cries out, with a new message. It's a message of action. The action is not to ascend to the mountain of God. The message is simply “get ready”.

Comfort is coming *in the wilderness*. In other words, it's coming to where we are, where we find ourselves now. It's coming in the place of hills and valleys, the rough places of our lives. Are you rough around the edges? Get ready, the Lord himself is coming. The word for “prepare” in **verse 3** has the usual connotation of “prepare the house”. It's like when someone important is coming over for dinner, what do you do? You clear away the old, you wash and clean and tidy. To “make straight” is to smooth, to make right. The idea is simple: God is coming—let's clear the path, let's make a highway.

Already you are applying this text. You say: “ok, comfort from God is coming, I need to get ready. Let me clean myself up, dust myself off a bit, tidy my spiritual house.” But wait a second. Have you ever seen a highway in a desert? Have you ever built a road in the mountainous wilderness? This is not easy. Not only this, but God is coming—what kind of road is fit for him? Isaiah is not saying that it is primarily our work to get ready in our own efforts. To attempt to prepare a path for God's glory would be like building I35 through the Rockies with Egyptian technology. It can't be done. This preparation is not a matter of effort, but of faith. Jesus himself said: “For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.” Preparing for the comfort of God is not about your own spiritual strength to move mountains. It's about trusting God can and will move mountains for you.

See **verse 4**. The image here is of a great mountainous range being suddenly leveled. The Himalayas flattened to the terrain of West Texas. Why? To show you that in your tumultuous, hill



and valley life, there is no obstacle to the comfort of God. Notice the certainty: every valley “shall be” lifted up. This is not a possibility, it’s a promise. But why the severity? Can’t God just do a little arranging, maybe a winding road?

The construction project must be severe, because of what is coming in **verse 5**. The comfort of God is equated to the revealing of the *glory of the Lord*. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, he was hidden by God behind a rock lest he explode with radiance. When he came down after seeing the back of God’s glory, he shone so brightly that he had to put on a veil. On Sinai, God’s glory was described as a devouring fire (Ex 24:17). God’s glory is what dwelt in the tabernacle behind the curtain, so that it was only visited by the appointed priest and even then he feared for his life. To put it simply: a revelation of God’s glory is no small matter. It’s so beautiful, so serious, so majestic, that if we are not prepared as a vessel for his glory, we will internally combust.

Martin Luther King Jr. preached from this text in his famous speech, “I Have a Dream”. As he dreamed of a country and a people healed from the great stain of racism, this is the passage his mind was drawn to. He knew that in order for God’s glory to be seen, we cannot move forward by our own strength. It takes faith in knowing that God has the power to level mountains and raise valleys. For the dream of racial justice, a great spiritual leveling of God is needed. For the dream of comfort in God, that leveling is needed too, and in fact is his great comfort.

The great road is not so you can walk. It’s for God to walk. But God doesn’t need a road. Still he made one—so that you didn’t have to come up to him to receive comfort, but so that he could come down to you. The coming of Jesus Christ was the great highway-project. The way was made by God’s power alone for his own son to indwell Human flesh. John the Baptist recognized this: it’s why when Jesus was about to start his ministry he called people to repent using this passage, to get their hearts ready for what was coming: total transformation. At the cross of Jesus, God’s glory was revealed in human weakness. The night was dark. But on resurrection day, God’s glory was revealed in victory. You may not feel ready for that kind of glory—but hear this... God is making you ready. He is building you as his house, his temple, by his Spirit. There is no stopping the comfort coming for you. Death couldn’t stop it, what makes you think the mountain range of your emotions, sins, and sufferings can?

Comfort is coming for you. Get ready, because you can't stop its glory. **It will have the last say (6-8).**

Isaiah is given one last message in **verses 6-8**. It’s a strange message, because it’s a message that seems dismal at first. All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. We are all headed for death. Nothing gold stays. Life is a vapor, a mist—here today, gone tomorrow. But there is good news here. Likely in the mind of Israel when they hear of the withering grass is the Khamsin, a dry sandy wind that blows into the Middle Eastern regions that causes grass to completely fade and wither in the course of a single day. Even flowers don’t last long, bluebonnet season is regrettably short. Such is our spiritual state. Comfort is fleeting when we realize death is



right around the corner. Isaiah actually attributes this to God, he says it is the “breath of the Lord” that blows. What he means to do is create a contrast. This is not to say that the breath of God is deadly, but rather in the presence of God, when he blows on us, when we see him rightly, we understand our position before him. When we really see God as he is, we recognize that we are like grass.

But the hope here is incredibly specific with the contrast. There is one thing without an expiration date. It’s not God’s discipline; that will end. It’s not exile, that will end. It’s not your life; that will end. It’s not the beauty of this world, that also will end. One thing lasts forever: the word of God.

Following Jesus is not about what you can do, it’s about what God promises to do for you. Take the cross and resurrection for example. When Jesus went up to the cross, he did what no one else could do. He took on your sin in his body. Only the perfect God-man could do that. And when Jesus rose from the grave, he did what no one else could do. He showed, once and for all, that only one thing stands forever, one thing really makes the difference: the Word of God.

Do you know the difference between Jesus’ resurrection and all previous resurrections? When Lazarus died, Jesus raised him from the dead. But the issue is, Lazarus was going to die again. He died, now he is awake, but in the same state as before. That is not what happened to Jesus. He died, and when he woke up it wasn’t so he could die again. He woke up to ascend to the Father and live eternally. So here is why the resurrection is the exclamation mark of human history: it ends the sentence. There is nothing left but comfort after being resurrected, nowhere left to go but up. And you walked into church this morning, and a bunch of us got on stage and we sang songs and read scripture and prayed together and I got up here and started talking and the message is the same—Resurrection Comfort. Jesus Christ rose from the dead so that you could have the comfort of rising with him. You can rise from the deadness of sin and never die again, but stand forever in a world of comfort with Jesus, the Word of God! And here is what it takes to walk out of here and leave everything behind except comfort: just listen and surrender. Open up your ears. Your warfare is ended, your iniquity is pardoned, the way has been made. Believe in the resurrected Jesus.

Let me end with a true story. I heard this while listening to another sermon,¹ it was so good I had to steal it. It’s perfect. This is a true story of a man named Hiroo Onoda. Hiro was an Imperial Japanese Army intelligence officer who fought in World War II. In 1945 when the war ended, he was stationed in the mountains of Lubang Island in the Philippines. His orders were to resist the American advance indefinitely. He never got the news. For over 30 years, he kept fighting WWII. We would steal rice and other food from villages on the island, every once in a while fire a few shots, burn something down. They dropped leaflets from airplanes, thousands of them with the actual order of surrender from a Japanese general, but to no avail. Onoda thought they were propaganda to get him to give up his position! The Japanese army sent his brother down from Japan and had him speak out through a loudspeaker into the jungle, but still he didn’t believe it. He

¹ <http://immanuelnashville.gutensite.net/resources/multimedia/details?id=1642888>



did not surrender until 1974, when his old commanding officer tracked him down in the mountains and ordered him to give up face to face.

Some of us are stuck in 1945. We are busy fighting a war that ended when Jesus walked out of the tomb. And God is dropping leaflets everywhere, crying to us continually: “comfort! Comfort! Your warfare is ended!” And you can live now in that freedom—you can live today in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because although everything else fades away, one thing stands forever: God’s word. And for all those today who hear his loudspeaker, come out of hiding, and surrender to him, his final word in the world is not condemnation. It’s comfort.

