

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Advent B Midweek • December 10, 2008
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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Comfort for Life in the Wilderness

I. The Comfort Fulfilled in Christ

Captivity. Wilderness. Promised Land.

The Israelites had seen it all before. Their ancestors had been captives in Egypt for 400 years before the Lord led them out by the hand of Moses. This meant another 40 years in the wilderness—no longer in captivity, but not the most enjoyable place to be, either. In fact, many Israelites rebelled along the way, claiming they preferred slavery in Egypt to the uncertainties of the wilderness. There was nothing uncertain about the wilderness, of course, since the Lord Himself was leading them. But whenever one doubts God's mercy, captivity looks inviting.

After forty years in the wilderness, the Lord led them across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The Lord kept His promises—not as quickly as the Israelites wanted, perhaps, but according to His mercy. For the One for whom a day is as a thousand years, they were in the wilderness less than an hour.

Isaiah the prophet spoke to Israelites who had squandered the Promised Land. They'd forsaken the Lord who had set them free, worshiping false gods and idols that enslaved them to works and promised them only death. Because they'd enslaved themselves to idols, it was only a matter of time that they'd also be enslaved by men. The kingdom was crumbling, and it was only a matter of time until the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took its citizens away—took them away back into...captivity.

It was to the captives in Babylon that Isaiah prophetically proclaimed our text.

¹Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

To those exiled citizens of Jerusalem who mourned their sins, the Lord proclaimed comfort through Isaiah. He tenderly declared pardon and the end of war. He did not hold their sins against them. Instead, He declared "double for all her sins:" not double the punishment, but double the forgiveness—grace upon grace. Their idolatry had led to captivity as their false gods had failed to protect them from Babylon. But the Lord declared pardon and grace: although they had forsaken Him, He had not forsaken them. He promised that a remnant would return from Babylon; better, He promised that the Messiah would come to save. The captivity would end.

God kept His promise, and a remnant returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. Many did not: they stayed in captivity. Maybe they got to like it there, thinking that exile wasn't all bad. Maybe they just got tired of waiting and figured that the Lord had forgotten them. Maybe they used their eyes to see withering grass more than their ears to hear God's promises of life. Maybe they lost faith and were too despondent to move. For whatever reason, they stayed. But those who returned rebuilt the temple and the city walls, waiting for the Lord to fulfill His plan of comfort and pardon as prophesied in Isaiah. Fittingly after captivity, it was fulfilled in the wilderness.

³A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

⁵And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. ⁶A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

According to God's will, at the proper time, John the Baptist's voice was heard crying in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. His preaching did not literally lower mountains and raise valleys; but it leveled the playing field of the hearers. High-society Pharisees, unpopular tax collectors and feared soldiers all came to hear John's proclamation, and they all heard the same message: repent. As Isaiah said: all people are like grass and wither away, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. As John preached, all people—of whatever station in life—faced death because of their sin, but the Lord has promised life in the Messiah. Leveled by the Law, all sorts of hearers repented, waiting to hear the prophet proclaim, "Behold, your God!" Soon, he would. Soon, John the Baptist would point to a man in the crowd and cry out, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

¹⁰Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Jesus, the Messiah, had come—not just a man, but the Lord-God-Himself-become-flesh. He'd come with might, but He hadn't come to rule with force like Caesar or Herod. He'd come with His reward—life; but so that He might give it to His people, He came to die. He came to tend His flock like a shepherd—like a shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. There, where the wilderness met the Promised Land, He appeared to take captivity captive by His life, death and resurrection.

It wasn't according to the peoples' schedule or expectations. He wasn't there to restore Judea as the Promised Land. Instead, God had become man to rescue them from the captivity of sin, lead them through the wilderness of a world turned against God, and deliver them to everlasting life.

II. The Comfort of Christ for You

Captivity. Wilderness. Promised Land.

The Lord doesn't tell us about Israel idly, just passing time because He needed to make the Old Testament longer. All of this is to point to His mercy and grace for you in Christ.

You were born into this world a captive to sin, death and devil. You've been set free from that in Christ. The Good Shepherd laid down His life on the cross so that you might be forgiven for your sins. He became sin on the cross to set you free from sin. By His Word, He has proclaimed liberty and release to you. You are no longer a captive to sin and enslaved to the devil. You're set free. You're an heir of the kingdom in the household of God.

This is good reason to rejoice: St. Paul writes, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Centuries later, that truth is just as astonishing: before you were conceived in sin, Christ died for you. He has delivered you from the captivity of sin, and He has promised to you the eternal Promised Land of heaven—where there

will be no more mourning, crying, pain or death, for these are former things that will have passed away. Those are captivity things and wilderness things, former things that won't be in heaven for eternity.

You're not there yet. You're still in the wilderness. You're in between Egypt and Canaan, between Babylon and the New Jerusalem. You're free from sin, but it still wants to take you captive. You're still in the world, but you're no longer of the world. You suffer the same troubles as everybody else around you, even though your citizenship isn't here. You're a stranger passing through on the way to the Promised Land.

The temptations for you are many, designed by the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh to make you forsake the Promised Land and the Lord who has died to get you there. And it is because of those many temptations that this Old Testament lesson is such a comfort for God's people—such a comfort for you.

Wilderness living can get rough enough that you might think that the Lord has led you out to die. That was what the Israelites voiced to Moses. When afflictions get difficult enough and there's no end in sight, the temptation is to believe that God is angry with you. But the Lord speaks tenderly to you and tells you that your warfare is ended and your iniquity is pardoned. You know this to be true, because you know that Christ has died for you on the cross. Thus the Lord says, "I pardon you for your sins because I condemned My Son for your sins. I have no wrath left to spend on you, because I spent it on Him. All I have left to give you, for His sake, is grace upon grace upon grace." Should you be tempted to believe that God is angry with you, repent, look to the cross and rest assured that He is not. For Jesus' sake, He delights that you are His.

With the vast throngs that crowd this wilderness, perhaps it might be a fear of feeling forgotten. There are people more important, people more in need: will the Lord remember you? Hear from Isaiah 40: the Lord lifts up the valleys and levels the mountains. His Law convicts all of their sin, and His Gospel announces forgiveness for all. You are not forgotten: if Christ has died for all people, and you are people, then Christ has died for you.

Beaten down enough, you may see no way out—after a while, the wilderness all looks the same and you can feel lost and alone. It is not so: in His time, the Lord prepared the way for His own coming. He has come into this wilderness to set you free and give you eternal life. And where you are lost, you may say with Thomas, "Lord, we do not know the way to where you are going." And then you rest in the Lord's promise: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Jesus is the Way, and He is as near to you as His Word. In this wilderness, He proclaims His Word of grace and life to you. He feeds you in His Supper, strengthening the faith and life He gave you in your Baptism. You are not lost and you are not alone. The Lord is with you, tending you like a shepherd.

Fear not: the Lord is with you. As Isaiah announces, "Behold your God." You hear His Word and say, "There He is." You hear of His presence in the Supper and add your "amen." Thus the Lord is with you throughout your days in this world. And where His presence in His means of grace does not seem mighty or powerful to you, remember that you look with sin-blurred vision. Remember that He has conquered death and throttled the grave for you. It's true, yes, that you will wither and fade like grass. But it is also true that the Word of the Lord stands forever. And the Word of God declares to you that your warfare is ended. Your iniquity is pardoned. For you in Christ, the Lord pours out on you grace upon grace. You are free from captivity. This wilderness has an end. And the Promised Land is yours. Because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen