

"A Double Portion"
Isaiah 40:1-2

4 December Anno DOMINI 2005
Advent 2 -- Series B
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Grace, mercy and peace to you in the Name of the LORD our God; that is, in the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Baptized,

A voice without a word is a messenger without a message. "Well, duh," you say. Okay, permit me to try it again. A voice without the Word of comfort is a wretched messenger without a message of hope. "Well, duh," you say, "Why would I want to hark a heralding angel like that?" The answer? You really have no choice, for messengers are legion, and they will have their say, and they will speak to you, and you will pay attention.

The messengers on television tell of a dad and his daughter drowning in a Wisconsin pond and of the impending advent of Bird flu. The phone rings and there's no one at the other end and you wonder what's up with that. Newspapers report the sad tidings of salivating terrorists moled up here in this land just waiting to get their hands on a dirty bomb in order to radiate and eradicate you.

Even if you toss out the TV, turn off your phone and cancel the paper, the messengers continue to get their sorted messages across to you. One piece of mail informs you that your water and sewer bill will increase by 40% with more hikes coming later. Another letter bears the watermarks of salty tears, letting you know that one of your loved ones is in jail, or is on drugs. Then there's that report card. You open another letter and the lab results have come back. The tumor will need to be irradiated.

And even if you eat an apple a day as you move your household and leave no forwarding address, the messengers come; for from within the depths of your heart and soul arise sins of days gone by and of present nights. There is that commandment about stealing and no one knows what I did except me and God, and the uneasiness thereof weighs heavily upon your mind and occupies your thoughts. You make a promise to God to do better and to do whatever it takes to balance out the sin on His Divine scale of justice. You attempt to do sufficient deeds of the Law for breaking the Law and in doing so you break the Law afresh. But now you discover that you are lusting and your conscience is accusing you; or you didn't lust and you are now so very proud of yourself. In response you utter a silent prayer thanking God for not being like that wretched sinner who is now eyeing you. Is that envy or lust?

Such is our world and so are the lives of our days., and on one of those days, a certain Monday morning dawned. A messenger, who lives in the same world you do, and who battles with the night trolls, and who is still called to carry out the duties of his vocation as messenger, opens his Bible in order to prepare a message for the faithful who will be congregating in the holy place on Sunday.

But remember, a voice without the Word of comfort is a wretched angel without a message of hope.

So, let's see, the Series "B" Old Testament Reading for the 2nd Sunday of Advent is from the Prophet Isaiah, the 40th chapter. The first verse is directed, not just to one messenger, but to all the messengers. Though the mouths are many, the voice is to be one and the message is to be one. Listen to what the LORD commands to His messengers:

“‘Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your God.”

It is imperative that the messengers do so. In other words, it's Law and it's not optional; and for emphasis, the command is repeated: “Comfort, comfort – Console, console.” Now, do you people realize what is being commanded here? Given the conditions reported earlier in this sermon, such a command seems, in the eyes of the old sinful adam, to be either absolutely absurd, or that God delights in mocking people as He dangles them over the yawning throat of hell on a spider web.

It would be fruitless to try to comfort you with a litany of messages of dealing with disease, dogging pain, drug addiction, divorce, dental decay, dust and death, and then to conclude such a death-bed, pastoral visit by pronouncing the secular benediction of, “Have a nice day.” And that's just the letter “D”! Or here, come confess your sins and you will be told that you can do better, and if you don't do better, don't feel too bad, for your eternal destruction will not be as bad as that other guy's hell, and oh, on your way out of my office pick up one of those yellow smiley buttons. Absurd? Mocking? Most certainly. Do you hear any: Comfort, comfort? Consoling, consoling? No, not at all. Such mockers will tell you, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14).

If the messenger is going to have a word of comfort, then the message is going to have to originate out of this world and then come into this world. And behold, it did and behold, it does! Oh, and you messengers, please note that the people congregated in the holy place are not your people. The congregation is the LORD's and the Church is God's. And also note, you messengers, that this is your God commanding you to comfort and console His people.

The “your” is plural and you-all are to comfort and console the LORD's people with this out-of-this-world and into-this-world message of hope, peace, grace and mercy. Or, as God spoke via the mouth of the Apostle Paul and the pen of Luke, the beloved physician, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the Church of God which He obtained with the Blood of His own Son” (Acts 20:28). So hearken your ears, you messengers for the LORD is speaking to all of you about what His Church shall hear, when He says:

“‘Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.’” You pastors. Your God. Your Call. His people. His message. His Church. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem; that is, speak to the heart of the Church – to that little flock congregated here and scattered there throughout the world – to the Bride of Christ. Speak tenderly to her heart – to the repentant, faithful Body of Christ. Do not drive her back to Mt. Sinai that Moses may accuse her today and on Judgment Day, by proclaiming now and then, “condemn, condemn.” No, to the penitent whose sin burdens and whose mouths cry out for grace, mercy and peace, you are to “comfort, comfort.” Therefore, take the Lord's Jerusalem and lead her to Mt. Calvary and let her behold her Savior, Mediator and Redeemer.

Therefore, beloved preachers, proclaim to the Lord's Church – both those of the Congregation in here and of the Diaspora out there – the content of the comforting Good News. “‘Comfort, comfort

My people,' says your God. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended.'”

In this world where there is wars and rumors of wars – in this native land where the Statue of Liberty has now become a Trojan Horse with the enemy within her borders and war impending – in such a world as this and for such a time as this, you comfort the Church of the One True God and tell her that her warfare is ended. This warfare is not of man against man, but is the enmity between the LORD God Almighty and the world. In order for our warfare to be ended, God the Father sent His Son to be the Redeemer of the world. The eternal Son of God was incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a Jewish maiden and nine months later was born in Bethlehem. A week later the Christ was named Jesus, for “He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). This is that out-of-this-world and into-this-world message of hope, peace, grace and mercy.

A voice from the wilderness directed the congregated people to Jesus the Christ and that fellow preacher cried out the comforting words, “Behold, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). For in Jesus “all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the Blood of His Cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

Dearly Beloved, because of Christ crucified and risen, your warfare with God is ended and “in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the Blood of Christ. For He is our Peace, Who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end” (Ephesians 2:13-16).

O preacher man, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.” Proclaim to the Lord’s Church that her transgressions – and all the transgressions of each member of the Church – are forgiven. Announce the complete forgiveness of all sins and that, “as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). Let the ears of the faithful Christian’s heart hear that his or her time of duty in the service of the Law has ended, and let them hear the voice from the mouth of an apostolic pastor that says, “My little children, I am’ preaching ‘this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous; and He is the Expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

And dear pastor, make certain that the congregation and each child of God therein understands the gift that has been given and is being received. That is, “Speak 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.” And you, dear Christian and faithful member of the Church, behold, there, in the LORD’s nail-pierced hands, is your gift. It is pardon from iniquity. It is forgiveness of sins. It is freedom of the cursed bondage of the Law. It is the washing away of all your transgressions, creating in you a clean heart. You all – both pastor and parishioner – you are free and forgiven, redeemed and restored.

And what of the Law? It has much to say and we ought to listen to it, and we must abide by it when dealing with our various vocations and sundry stations. But we leave the Law behind when we

ponder our justification before God. Neither do any of our sins against the Law of God condemn us nor do any of our good works done in Christ justify us.

Thus, in speaking of our salvation we are not to listen to the accusing voice of the Law. We are, rather, to reply to those who advocate salvation by good works, merits or deeds, saying to them, “Stand aside, lawman, you must not drag me to Mt. Sinai where the commandments are, for, in my Baptism, I have been carried by Christ to Mt. Calvary where my forgiveness was wrought and ushered into my place in the Presence of God, and I must stay on Mt. Zion, the Church, where that forgiveness continues to be proclaimed in the Word by my faithful pastor and to be served to me in the Supper of my Lord Jesus, all for the forgiveness of all my sins.”

And if the Devil accuses you, dredging up all manner of wickedness, sin, vice and dirt, you reply, “Satan, you are most correct in stating that I am a sinner. But you’ve only listed a few of my sins. I have committed many more. Indeed, I have sinned much and I’m not proud of that fact, but I do have a Savior Who has given double forgiveness for all my sins. No doubt, one drop of His Holy, Precious, Innocent Blood would take away the sins of all people of all time. But behold, Jesus extended His hands, shed all His Blood and gave His Life for all, of which I am one. The Church has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins and I am a child of God and a member of the Body of Christ. You must step aside, Satan, for I’m going to the Lord’s Supper to receive the very Body and Blood of Christ.”

Thanks be to God. Dearly beloved, such is our Life and so are our days in the Lord’s Church. So, on one of those days, a certain Tuesday afternoon, a messenger, who lives in the same world you do, and who battles with the night trolls, and who is still called to carry out the duties of his vocation as messenger, closes his Bible after preparing a message to the faithful who congregate in the holy place. The text is Isaiah 40:1-2 . . .

“‘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, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.’”

Dearly beloved, as was said before, according to the Word of the LORD God and in His stead, so I say again giving you a double portion this day. Behold, you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.