

“COMFORT, COMFORT, YE MY PEOPLE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 3:3-8; II Corinthians 1:3-7

Introduction.

It is the season of advent and Christmas with all of its sights, sounds, tastes and smells and memories. For one month of the year, we get to sing and listen to many of our favorite hymns and songs. One of the best parts of our annual celebration is Handel’s Messiah.

George Frideric Handel was a German born composer of opera who spent most of his life in London up to the mid-1700s. When his operas began to fail, along with his health, Handel sank into bankruptcy and despair, believing his career was over.

In the summer of 1741, a devote Christian by the name of Rev. Charles Jennens paid a visit to Handel and handed him the text, or libretto as it is properly call, for an oratorio he wanted Handel to compose. It consisted completely of Scripture, 81 verses from 14 different books of the Bible, but mostly from Isaiah, the Psalms and I Corinthians 15.

Handel took the text and composed what is one of the world’s greatest masterpieces in music. He went into seclusion, barely eating or sleeping and in 24 days he finished a 260 page handwritten manuscript for a two-and-a-half hour oratorio, that is considered by many to be the greatest feat in the history of musical composition.

At the end of the manuscript, he wrote the initials “SDG,” Soli Deo Gloria, “To God alone be (the) Glory.” About the Messiah Handel said, “I think I did see all heaven before me, and the great God Himself.”

When his eyesight began to fail, Handel underwent surgery, but with the tragic result of total blindness. He continued to perform for eight years,

until, at age 74, he collapsed while conducting a performance of Messiah. He died April 14th, 1759, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His grave is marked by a statue of Handel at his table, with the score of Messiah opened to the page, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."
Chuck Colson.

The Messiah is divided into three parts, the birth, the death and the resurrection of the Messiah.

Lord willing from now until Christmas day I want to reflect on a few of the texts in the first part of the Messiah, and then on Christmas day, on the Hallelujah chorus. Isaiah 40:1-5 is the opening text for the Messiah. To understand why Jennens chose this text to open the Messiah, we have to know the context.

Isaiah.

Isaiah was one of Israel's greatest prophets. He lived in Jerusalem and prophesied during the reigns of four kings in Judah, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). He prophesied during times of tumultuous change, the decline and fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the spiritual decline of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Isaiah pleaded again and again for Judah to wake up.

The book of Isaiah has 66 chapters. Some like to call it the mini-Bible which has 66 books. And the prophecy of Isaiah divides very clearly into the first 39 chapters and the last 27 chapters, just like the Bible, 39 books in the OT and 27 books in the NT.

Isaiah 1-39 is about God's judgment on Israel and 40-66 is about God's deliverance.

In chapter 39 Isaiah prophesied that Judah would be defeated and carried off into captivity. And just over a century later the prophecy came true. The Babylonian army overtook Jerusalem and led the survivors into captivity far from Israel.

Chapter 40 begins a major new section of the book. Isaiah is no longer addressing Judah in his own day. By the Holy Spirit he is seeing far into the future, he is seeing a day when God will rescue and deliver His people. His grace will prevail.

Isaiah contains one of the clearest expressions of the gospel of Jesus Christ in all the Old Testament. It includes the full scope of His life: the announcement of His coming (Isaiah 40:3–5), His virgin birth (7:14), His proclamation of the good news (61:1), His sacrificial death (52:13–53:12), and His return to claim His own (60:2–3).

Every aspect of Jesus' life and ministry on earth, was prophesied and announced 700 years before the fact. And it all came true exactly as the old prophets said. What does this tell us about the prophecies that are not yet fulfilled, prophecies about the end of time when Jesus returns a second time in great glory to judge the nations?

Reading the Messianic prophecies in the OT should be a source of great believing and hope in your life. If God announced these things 700 years before they happened, and they happened just as He said they would, that is great cause to trust and believe and obey the living God who is sovereign over all the earth and sovereign over all my life.

Christianity is the only religion in the world that has predictive prophecy that are fulfilled in the pages of human history. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam have no verified prophecies that have been fulfilled in space and time.

Isaiah alone made hundreds of prophecies, important predictions, saying what would happen and when. Isaiah spoke the future and it happened.

After 39 chapters of prophetic warning and judgment, Jerusalem needs some comfort.

God is the God of comfort, and when God comforts it is not with pious sounding words or nice platitudes, or pity. God gives substantive reasons for His comfort.

Isaiah 40:1-2, Comfort announced.

Isaiah 40 is one of the great chapters in the Bible. It's in that same mountain range where Romans 8 is the tallest peak. In this chapter the glory of God is revealed and proclaimed for the salvation of dying sinners. The message of salvation glorifies God and forgives, comforts and strengthens sinners.

The prophecies of the OT often have two dimensions to them, one near and one far. They are like a mountain range where you can see some mountains closer, and then behind them some in the distance.

Isaiah is able to see ahead to the front range, but he also is able to see well beyond to the distant peaks and a greater day of the revelation of the glory of the Lord.

In Isaiah chapter 40, the prophet Isaiah speaks about the restoration that will come after the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of God's people. Isaiah actually prophecies the name of King Cyrus, the Persian king who will return God's people from exile.

But he is also clearly talking about things in the distance, when John the Baptist comes and prepares the way for the coming Messiah who will also deliver God's people from exile.

This chapter belongs to us, it speaks even to our day. It speaks of the Gospel and the Gospel belongs to us.

We are told to take comfort. But it is not just a vague comfort, not just an untethered comfort. We are told the source. God will come and care for his people. God is the God who comforts.

Do you see that this is the most comforting part of this? After 39 chapters of warning and judgment, God still calls them "my people." And God still calls Himself, their God, your God. He still calls them His Jerusalem even when in exile. I will be their God, and they will be my people. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

This is God's comfort to us, that even while we were yet sinners, He loved us and He still loves us and His deepest intention for us is His comfort.

God comes to comfort His people with His promises. And later He will send the comforter. Here God is speaking tenderly to Jerusalem, His people, as a good shepherd. Later He will send the Good Shepherd.

And what is this comfort God gives?

Isaiah 40:2

The three "that's" give the three aspects of this comfort and the three reasons for it.

First, her warfare, her hard labor, her exile is over, it is accomplished. This was reason for comfort.

Second, payment has been made for all her sins, and God has accepted what she has suffered as sufficient. This is real comfort; to be recognized as a sinner — as one having iniquity — yet knowing just as much that our iniquity is pardoned.

Third, says she has been fully punished. God has mercy, He doesn't afflict forever.

In Isaiah 53 God will give Isaiah the prophecy of how exactly their iniquity will be pardoned, when the suffering Servant comes and bears all our sin and makes atonement in His blood.

What good news, what a great Gospel according to Isaiah. For 39 chapters they had heard of their sin and God's judgment and discipline. But now at last, in chapter 40 Judah is assured of God's full atonement for all her sins.

The message God wants so urgently proclaimed is that God is determined to assure His people of His forgiveness. God wants this message to get out especially to those who are tempted to think God has forsaken them or abandoned them, which would have been easy for the exiled to think.

Isaiah 40:3-5, Comfort achieved.

He announces what will happen when the Lord comes.

Isaiah 40:4 Every 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.

This is not a call for civil engineers to start building super-highways. This is the work of proclaimers of the Gospel. God prepares a way and makes straight the path.

The desert wilderness represents this sin-filled, strife-filled, rebellious world of ours.

The leveling of mountains is bringing down the self-righteousness and the proud who don't think they need a Savior.

The raising up of the valleys is giving hope to poor sinners who felt there was no possible Savior for them. The depressed and discouraged and defeated will be raised up. Those on difficult paths with so many obstacles will find the way made straight.

There is no mountain high enough or valley low enough to be an obstacle to God and His love and grace and favor getting through to us. There is nothing Satan can put in our path that will hinder God from accomplishing His purposes.

All four Gospels identify the voice as John the Baptist, the forerunner who in the spirit of Elijah came announcing the arrival of the Messiah who makes straight the way in the wilderness. He came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and preaching repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

This new highway is the highway of repentance and forgiveness. God is leading a forgiven people home.

Isaiah 40:5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed in three ways. At the incarnation of the Son of God, the Messiah.

All flesh, all nations, will be without excuse, they shall see the salvation of the Lord. Pagans enter into the Christmas season with all its celebrations and music and gifts, all of it pointing to Jesus and they are oblivious. There are pagans who enjoy singing the Messiah because it is great music and yet are unmoved by the message of the Messiah. The glory of the Lord has been revealed.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Beyond the incarnation, there is the great revelation of the glory of God on the cross of Christ. There all the attributes of God are so brilliantly displayed.

And there is yet one more revelation when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Matthew 24:29-30 The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

There is coming a day when the glory of the Lord will be revealed in such a way as it's never been revealed before. The glory of the Lord Jesus will be revealed and all the tribes, all flesh, will see it together. For some it will be a great day of mourning as they hear the words, “Behold your judge.” For others it will be a day of unspeakable joy as they hear the words, “Behold your God.” John Piper

Have you beheld the glory of Jesus in your life, is He real to you, is His grace and truth a true source of joy, peace, gratitude to you? Do you know this comfort, the comfort of warfare ended, the comfort of peace with God, the comfort of pardon for all your iniquity, the comfort of your sins paid for? Is the Messiah your greatest source of comfort in this life?

The mouth of the Lord has spoken. The words are guaranteed by the authority of the one saying them, with a confident certainty and finality.

Implications and application.

II Corinthians 1:3-7 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all *comfort*, 4 who *comforts* us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to *comfort* those who are in any affliction, with the *comfort* with which we ourselves are *comforted* by God. 5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in *comfort* too. 6 If we are afflicted, it is for your *comfort* and salvation; and if we are *comforted*, it is for your *comfort*, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our *comfort*.

Prayer: Blessed are You, Lord God of all creation. You entered time and space and took on flesh. Help us to marvel at the wonder and mystery of the Messiah and sing of greater things, Amen.