

ADVENT 2 B**“Cry Out the Comfort of God’s Good News Word”****Isaiah 40:1-11**

This is the season of comfort. Companies advertise their products for us to purchase as presents based on them being comfortable. What is your idea of comfort? It may be a warm robe, fuzzy slippers, a razor with a smooth shave, a recliner that sits so well or a vehicle that wraps you in luxury and glides gracefully down the highway. (Ok, I’ll take one of those.) But this physical comfort that is publicized, purchased, packaged and presented as a Christmas gift is good only for this body and only for a short while. Jesus is God’s Christmas gift who brings us the eternal comfort of God’s Word, the good news of His forgiveness of our sins.

It is said that the job of a preacher is to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted. This is just another way of saying that he should preach God’s law and gospel. The preacher is to proclaim God’s words of law for the condemnation of our sins and God’s words of gospel for the forgiveness of our sins. That is exactly what the prophet Isaiah did for God’s people in Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, about 700 years before Jesus was born. He did so for a long time, 60 years, and left us with a long book of 66 chapters. As our 8th graders learned this past week in class, this makes Isaiah what we call a major prophet.

Today’s passage from Isaiah chapter 40 begins a section in his book that is so different in tone from his messages in the previous 39 chapters that some Bible scholars and many biblical critics want to say that this second half has to come from a totally different author. They believe that someone else had to write the rest of the book with its wonderful messages of God’s comfort. But what they don’t understand is that Isaiah is doing what all faithful preachers do, that is, proclaiming God’s harsh law against our sin and then God’s sweet gospel offering us His salvation from our sin.

Warfare, iniquity, sins, these had been the subjects of Isaiah’s prior messages. Warfare as God’s people battled enemy nations trusting in their military might, superior soldiers and diplomatic alliances to provide them victory and security. But when they gave up relying on their covenant God and instead fought enemies on their own, they lost again and again. Their iniquity of idolatry and their sins of selfishness offended the holiness of their one true and only God. As the people pulled away from worshipping the Lord God only, He turned away from blessing them richly.

Once that lesson has been learned, once that sermon has sunk in, once that message has been mastered, then comes God's good news for us. Warfare is ended, iniquity is pardoned, and the Lord is doing doubly good to His people in return for the bad they did to Him. So now a voice cries out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." He comes bringing good to us. Let's make the way for His coming as straight, smooth, flat and level as possible.

We are seeing preparations being made for road work that is supposed to take place sometime through Red Bud on Highway 3. Many potholes already have been repaired with concrete patches. Sections of sidewalks are being dug up and replaced to meet state specifications. Hopefully, eventually, within my lifetime, fresh pavement will be applied that will provide us a smooth road surface to drive on through town.

The way of our Lord, though, is not prepared by shovels, trucks and big machinery working on a highway. It does not come from our efforts, our energy or our excellence. We do not bring the Lord into our lives by anything we do. He comes into our lives through His Word proclaimed and His Sacraments shared. In our gospel reading that happened by the preaching and baptizing ministry of John. In the wilderness of Judea he preached for people to repent of their sins and he performed a baptism for that purpose. John was not preparing a physical road for vehicles to drive on, but getting people spiritually ready for God's promised Savior, for the glory of the Lord to be revealed in the person and work of His one and only eternal Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ.

The mouth of the Lord speaks, revealing Himself to the people He has created. This can be a harsh word of judgment that blows upon our frail lives. The cry of the preacher sometimes has to reflect that harshness. All that we cherish as valuable, even our very lives themselves, wither and fade like the spring grass and flowers wilt when the summer's hot air blows on them. What a contrast is God's enduring Word that stands forever. But its judgment is only a part of what God works for His people. His Word is also life-giving and faith-creating. The preacher has good news to proclaim, a message that is to be shouted from the highest mountain.

“Behold your God! Behold the Lord comes!” Our God is not a block of lifeless wood or cold stone, an image made in the likeness of a sinful worshipper. No, ours is a living Lord and a great God who arrives on the scene with might and power. He rules His people with a strong arm to defend us and to provide for us. As a child I would always be excited when my father returned home from an out-of-town business trip. The first thing I would say when he walked in the door was, “What did you bring me?” He learned always to bring me something from wherever he had been. Our heavenly Father comes into our lives bringing us His reward. It is what His own Son Jesus Christ has earned for us by His perfect human life, innocent sacrificial death and victorious bodily resurrection. The reward He has earned for us are the blessings of God’s free forgiveness of our sins, new life in His name now, and full life in His presence forever.

This same Lord who comes into our world with might to defeat our spiritual enemies of sin, death and the devil, also comes into our lives as a gentle, protecting shepherd who looks out over His flock with concern for our well-being. He carries us with care when the burdens of life in this sinful world weigh us down. He holds us tightly to Himself when temptations to wander away from Him threaten our faith.

The way of the Lord into our lives is not to become a dead-end street. Very little traffic travels on such roads. Likewise, God does not want His goodness to us to get stuck in our lives. We act as a dead-end street when we live our days without joy in Jesus, when we keep His Word of life to ourselves, and when we act in ways no differently from unbelievers in this sinful world. On the other hand, God’s highway of life runs through us when we live in a hope that overcomes those troubles we face in life. God’s highway of life runs through us when we share God’s good news of salvation in Jesus with others.

God’s forgiveness of our sins in His Son, Jesus Christ, is a message of comfort which lasts forever. As the baptized people of God in Jesus, each one of us is a messenger who has received God’s good news of comfort in hope. We make use of it in our lives and then through our lives we share this good news with those around us. Amen.