

WHOSE VOICE DO I HEAR?

I. The Lord's voice of comfort

II. My own voice which brings peace

Isaiah 40:1-11

Be comforted by the voice of God who speaks to you through his word the message of forgiveness and love! Amen.

It is apparent that comfort comes in all shapes, sizes, and forms. Often babies or little ones find comfort in dragging around a tattered blanket maybe while sucking on their thumb. Comfort is found in teddy bears or going to bed with flashlights so that the boogieman or closet monsters don't get you. But if your blanket has been set aside and you have no worry about a closet monster maybe we seek our comfort from other things. You can be sure that when you find Pastor Bickelhaupt wearing his favorite pair of Levis with an old sweat shirt that I am absolutely comfortable and relaxed. What brings you comfort? Maybe relaxation begins with a piece of chocolate, a scoop of ice cream or a cup of hot tea. Hallmark Greeting Cards are in the business to provide comfort to people, cheering individuals who are down with a meaningful poem or a funny comment. Remember, laughter is sometimes the best medicine that can provide comfort.

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But what happens when the blankets get lost and outgrown? What happens when Pastor Bickelhaupt eats too much comfort food and then can't fit into his blue favorite blue jeans and sweat shirt? Where's the comfort then? Hallmark cards are wonderful to receive but after awhile they get filed in a drawer or in the trash can. The message gets forgotten along with the punch lines to the jokes that once gave us a smile. Comfort is something that is searched for daily and people spend much money on trying to be comforted.

However, I want to share with you comfort that does not wear out nor is it outgrown. It is a comfort that can not simply be bought at Wal-Mart but instead is freely given to you from your God, a comfort which not just long lasting but is everlasting. As we prepare our hearts for Christmas season let us take a deep breath forgetting about all of the Holiday shopping, parties, long lines, baking, decorating, and to-do lists which often steals from us the comfort that Christmas is meant to bring. For a few minutes let's you and I focus our attention on God's voice which is heard through the words of Isaiah chapter 40. What a blessing it is that we who live in a world that often searches for rest and peace can listen intently as the Lord freely shares the greatest comfort that exists.

Isaiah 40:1-2, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."

During Holiday shopping it is common not to see just one red tag in the window that reads, "Sale," but many sale signs. Merchants want to catch our attention. When there is road construction in town the construction crew does not set up only one sign but usually the warning signs are repeated many times as they lead you through the construction area. If something is important it is worth repeating.

God catches our attention immediately in verse one by emphasizing his purpose for giving to us His word. As we begin our journey through this section of Scripture he sets up for the purpose for which these words were written. "Comfort, comfort," he says. The Lord is speaking directly to your heart. Immediately he gives a reason to find comfort by calling us something very special. Many times I think the reason that we feel down or sad is because we forget who we are. We may simply think that we are men who go to work each day and are piled with stress and burdens. Maybe as women you fall into the trap of thinking you are simply unappreciated and have been taken for granted for all that you do in your jobs and in your home. Or maybe someone has made you feel worthless or has even labeled you with a demeaning term. In school it may be that you feel that you do not fit in with the cool crowd or feel that you go unnoticed. Identifying who you are builds esteem and creates confidence. And the good news is we do not have to search for identity because tells us exactly who we are. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." As believers we do find peace in the beautiful fact that the Lord has claimed us to be his very own.

Last week a musical manuscript that was worked on by Beethoven in 1826 was put up for auction. It was recently found in a Seminary's library in Philadelphia. The manuscript was tattered, marked up with red crayon and reworked so many times that the paper was punctured. But that did not seem to matter because the manuscript sold on auction for 1.2 million dollars. The tattered piece of music is valuable because Beethoven once owned it. It is evident that the famed composer worked on it feverishly to make a beautiful piece.

I can not stress to you enough how valuable you are because are God's workmanship and has claimed you be his own. You are God's people and we all need to sometimes stop and reflect on that. When life is hectic and gets us down - when things are not going our way - when we feel unappreciated or unimportant - when temptation is about to overcome us and sin looks appealing remember who God has made you. Find peace in God's voice this morning as he speaks tenderly to your heart the threefold message of comfort which is found in verse 2. Isaiah carried this message to the Israelites thousands of years ago and its truth extends to us today.

Isaiah 40:2, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins."

First, the "hard service" is done. The words that are used can be translated as "warfare" or "military service." God's nation was physically battered and bruised by the Babylonian army. As captives to their enemies they had little comfort. The Promised Land was taken from them and many were living in foreign countries without a temple in which to worship. Their freedom was taken away and they suffered. But not only is God referring to physical bondage but also to the spiritual bondage that plagued his people, and that now plagues you and me. Every one of us was born into sin and therefore became a slave to death. The shackles of death are fastened to all people. God compares us to grass that grows up strong but then fades away. All of us are familiar with the frailty of life. Here one day and gone tomorrow. The prime of life fades like the flowers of the field and the glory that we once experienced is forgotten over time. Death looms in the distance for everyone and has caused many to despair and become depressed. People search for cures that extend life, for ways to somehow cheat death. But for us the search is over because through Jesus Christ the bondage of death has been removed. The hard service and struggle against death is over. No longer do you need to battle against it because Jesus already has. His resurrection from the dead proclaims that you are free from the shackles of death and can live in the comfort knowing that these bodies will someday live forever in heaven. Death can not separate you from your God nor does your sin destroy your relationship with him.

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God was speaking tenderly to a nation that left him for other gods and a people who rejected the Lord. Through this good news God was calling them back to him. Their sin had been paid for. Your sin has been paid for! That is a message that we hear every single Sunday. I pray that it is not a message that is taken for granted, but realize that is the most important reason for being at Apostles. Every single Sunday we can come to God with the guilt that steals our comfort and lay it before him by confessing our sin. Through the absolution that Vicar or I pronounce you actually receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ, the atoning sacrifice. He gave his life to pay the price for your guilt and shame. The burden of sin is removed from you. That truth is emphasized again and again when we receive the Lord's true body and blood in Holy Communion. The blood and body you receive is the blood and body that died to take away your sin. You are not only God's people, but he has cleansed you making you holy, blameless, and without accusation.

Without speaking a single word my wife shows her love to me by not only baking chocolate chip cookies but double chocolate chip cookies. God does not only give us a few blessings but we "have received double from His hand." Just like the chocolate chips are not counted out in each cookie God is not counting out for us a measured quantity of blessings. It simply means that he deals out abundant blessings. Instead of being guilt-burdened you can leave with a clean conscience. Instead of being shackled by the

fear of hell you have the gift of heaven. Instead of unending despair you have eternal hope. Instead of worrying about health, finances, your children, your marriage, and the future you have the comfort of knowing that the Lord will open up to you his hand of blessings so that in all things, everything will work out for your good - for you his people. You are guaranteed that not because I as a Pastor say so but because with the ears of faith we know that it is God speaking to us through these words. Find eternal comfort in your Savior's voice and find daily strength through this threefold promise.

But his voice is not the only one you should be hearing. God told Isaiah and he tells you and me in verse 6 to "Cry out!" You and I are bearers of good news! But often our sinful natures do not recognize this as a

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privilege but instead of burden. Instead of shouting high from the mountains and lifting up our voices boldly do we cower behind poor excuses and allow timidity to hide God's message of salvation? Every day you should hear your own voice boldly sharing Jesus with others at your work. If you cannot talk about religion invite someone out to lunch so that together you can feed on spiritual food. God makes a point to say, "Do not be afraid!" and you and I must make it a point to say to others, "Here is your God!" Here is the one who forgives, who loves, and who cares for you. Here is your Savior who comforts you in life and in death!

Do not be afraid to open your mouths and proclaim the same message you cherish in your heart! Parents do not miss the opportunities to speak with your children about God. So often our society makes us afraid to instruct our children telling us that if we "push" religion that they will back away. Isn't it more of a threat that if we do not make religion a priority in their lives that their sinful natures will back away from God? Speak boldly, speak often, and speak tenderly and with love of the comfort that you yourself find through Isaiah's words. He gently leads those who have young.

This lesson has a special place in my memory and in my heart. These words were the basis of the sermon that was preached on the day that I was told I was coming to Billings, Montana, to be a Pastor. What a privilege it is to be a mouth piece for our God to spread the comforting message of forgiveness. As we continue to listen to His voice which strengthens, encourages, and lifts may we be motivated by Jesus' love so that we hear our own voices speak of the comfort that does not end.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God! Amen.

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