

“Speak Tenderly to Jerusalem” – Isaiah 40:1-5
December 13, 2020 –PM Service
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
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Is. 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 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.

Is. 40:3 A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD;
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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.

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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray together

Time Magazine has declared that 2020 is “The Worst Year Ever.” *Time* goes on to qualify this of course – highlighting that they mean the worst year for those who are still living, and then qualifying it again to those who are under 100 years old, and so on. But are they right?

Of course it is not hard to see their point. Of all the years that we have lived, many would consider 2020 to be the worst. So much has happened that it is hard to see beyond the difficulties we have faced.

One writer named Annaliese Griffin explains that, while no one is actually blaming 2020 for all the difficulties we face, we are all using it as a scapegoat. She says,

“Declaring 2020 the worst year ever is a form of collective commiseration that gives a name to a difficult experience and makes us feel less alone. It’s a coping mechanism.... Blaming the year has become a convenient container into which we can stash every difficult truth and terrible event. It’s a way to distance ourselves from the moment.

We're choosing to believe that everything that is difficult will pass when the calendar changes."¹

Griffin is right here. Many of us are hopeful that the end of this year will mark the end of all these hardships. But we are also very aware that it isn't the year, right?

While these past 12 months might have been horrible for us, there are others who have lived through much more difficult circumstances than we have.

Without discounting the suffering many have undergone this year, it isn't hard to imagine that for those of you who have lost children, spouses or parents in other years would feel that 2020 pales in hardships compared to other years.

See, looking at our pain in relation to a particular year is to almost limit the pain and suffering others have undergone in other time periods. Long before 2020, people have been suffering in extremely difficult ways.

And that is because life is hard. We all will suffer in this life. That is what it means to be a human being in a fallen world.

There is no one who has not felt that in some way or another. And the longer you have lived, the more opportunities you have had to verify that for yourself.

There are illnesses in our lives that weigh and bring us down, that are heavier burdens than we can lift. These sorts of illnesses can be discouraging us. These are heavy burdens that sometimes only seem to become more and more difficult as time goes on.

Some of you here at church know exactly what I'm talking about. You are suffering through debilitating illnesses that have no earthly cure. Some of you have suffered through strokes, cancer, heart-related issues, miscarriages, COVID, and so much more. Others of you are suffering alongside the loved ones who are suffering with these difficulties and extreme hardships.

Sometimes these trials come because of illnesses. Other times they come because of the lives we have lived.

This morning Pastor Nicoletti preached on patience. Didn't it just make you impatient? To think about all that we have to do, and all the ways we have to grow?

When we are impatient, angry or sin against those we love and against God in other ways, we suffer the consequences of those actions and feel shame and guilt.

And we also feel shame and guilt when we suffer with things that seem less significant – loneliness, constant exhaustion, anxiety, or despair and depression.

¹ <https://forge.medium.com/2020-isnt-the-problem-f5464024b5fc>

These sorts of things impact us in significant ways – directly or indirectly.

And the more we consider these things, the more exasperated we can become. So how do we manage it? How do we respond as believers to a constantly mounting heap of failures, problems and trials?

Coping Methods

You may have heard me mentioned this before, but when we served as missionaries in Peru, we noticed a common practice at funerals. Whenever a parent or child was mourning their loved one, those around them would tell them, “Don’t cry, don’t cry.”

They were trying to help, but their solution was to have people cover up their tears, to suppress their feelings.

And while we might understand their intent, it is easy to see the error in this. You can’t just cover up the pain and expect it to go away. You can’t just ignore the struggles you are facing! How terrible!

And yet, I believe that we all do the same thing but in different ways.

We know the issues we face are too hard for us to deal with - that we often can’t do anything to alleviate our situations.

So in order to cope with our pain and discouragement, we distract ourselves. We don’t let our pain out, and instead we cover it up with all sorts of things. Be it busyness, cleanliness, leisure, eating, working out, alcohol, TV or work. These can all be things we use to cover our feelings up with distractions.

We find all sorts of ways to press down our suffering or ignore it and fool ourselves. And we are very good at doing this. We have become masters at hiding our suffering from ourselves and others. This morning a brother commented to me that sometimes the very place where we would hope we are most honest and genuine (referring to church) is the very place where we hide our suffering the most.

But the truth is that we all suffer and our suffering weighs heavily on us. And if we only cover it up and if we have no real solution then we will despair. We will become overwhelmed with everything and turn toward unhelpful solutions.

This is our tendency, and I highlight this because it is something that we have to realize about ourselves. We often times deal with our pain by covering it up instead of dealing with it appropriately. This is only a temporary solution. It is not a fix. It is only a distraction.

This, however, is not God’s solution. God’s solution is given to us in this text.

Context of the message

And I speak at length about our suffering and coping mechanisms to first impress upon us that whether we want to admit it or not, we all suffer. And we may have more weighing on our hearts than we realize.

But second, to give us a greater sense of the gift that God's comfort really is to us. Because without understanding our situation, we often don't appreciate God's generous gift.

You see, God's message actually comes to Israel in the context of great suffering and "the declaration and threat of judgment."

E.J. Young explains that this chapter is given in the midst of the "people's tragic condition," and when the heinousness of sin is clear, then the words of comfort have much more impact.²

Another commentator reflects that the placement of this chapter is significant! He says, "It is remarkable that the word of doom (39:5-7) and the word of comfort (40:1) lie side by side. No sooner is just judgement pronounced than (an equally) just comfort is heralded...."³

You see, God's people were suffering and were feeling the weight of sorrow. Their hearts were heavy. No doubt the guilt and shame of all their failures throughout the years weighed heavily on their hearts. They had broken the covenant with God over and over again and were now facing the consequences of their failures.

Not just here in Isaiah, but repeatedly through the books of scripture. Beginning with Adam and Eve's disobedience, Noah's drunkenness, Abraham's faithlessness in God's promise through Sarah, to David's murder and adultery, the lists of God's people failing and sinning are found throughout Scripture.

And their pattern continues today in our own hearts. In addition to our suffering due to illnesses, we also have a pattern of sin and faithlessness, a tendency toward disobedience, unbelief, and betraying our covenant vows.

We, like the Israelites, will suffer the consequences of our sinful actions in this life. And like Israel, we will also suffer because we live in a fallen world in corrupted and failing bodies.

All these things leave us brokenhearted and feeling utterly helpless. That is hard news to carry. And yet, it is in the middle of that darkness that God's light and glory bursts forth into the lives of the Israelites.

And this is how God often demonstrates his glory and power. God breaks into the darkness to bring us comfort.

² Edward J. Young, 19.

³ J. Alec Motyer, 273.

The Salvation of Jonah

To help illustrate this point, I think it is helpful to look to the story of Jonah. Because in this story we see a drastic change.

Jonah is escaping from God on a ship, and God brings a tremendous storm upon him. When it becomes obvious that the storm is there because of Jonah, they cast him into the sea.

He was certain that he was as good as dead. And we know that because the words of Jonah chapter 2 describe his feelings of desperation.

He says:

“The waters closed in over me ***to take my life;***
 the deep ***surrounded*** me;
 weeds were ***wrapped about my head***
 6 at the roots of the mountains.
 I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;”

Jonah was certain that his life was over. Even after that fish swallowed him, he had no idea that he would survive. He probably thought he had become fish food.

Or perhaps at first he had hope, but then after two days had passed, he probably thought he was as good as dead. But then suddenly, in the midst of his utter darkness, despair and discouragement, God breaks into the scenario and causes the fish to spit him up on dry ground.

In moments, God takes a man who is as good as dead – and deserved to be as good as dead – and gives him life.

Jonah says, “yet you brought up my life from the pit,
 O LORD my God....
 Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

From being in an aquatic grave of sorts in the depths of the sea in the belly of a fish, surrounded in darkness, God saves him.

And in the same way, despite the fact that we justly deserved eternal punishment, as well as suffering on this earth, God comes and speaks tenderly to us – to Jerusalem.

As with Jonah’s salvation, Israel’s salvation has nothing to do with their abilities, or their good works. As with Jonah’s salvation, they could not save themselves or make restitution for their sins. And neither can we.

God comes to us when our situation is bleak, and we know we cannot save ourselves and ***he speaks tenderly*** to us.

He extends comfort. Just as he did with his people, just as he did with Jonah, he does with us.

This is important to note, because some believe that we can in some way make restitution with God or somehow pay for our sins. But here it is evident that we cannot assume that God extends his comfort because we have suffered enough for our sins in this world. One commentator says,

“Is it that they will have then suffered enough to cancel out those earlier sins? Will a coolly judicial God then declare that the case is closed? Does Israel somehow save herself? Hardly! The cause for encouragement is solely the activity of the Lord, his coming into this sphere of human activity. Neither Israel nor any other human agency is the cause of the comfort here extended. It is the coming of God....”⁴

So we read that it is not because of works, but solely because of God’s work.

Why?

And why? Why does he do this for a sinful and ruined people?

He does it because of his covenant. Look closely at who is offering the comfort and who is the intended recipient. These words are spoken to **my** people by **your** God.

Without a question this is covenant language. No longer do we hear the scornful ‘**this** people’ but ‘**my** people.’⁵

“The people belong to God, for he has chosen them.... Even though they may forsake him, he will not abandon them.... For God does not forsake his own.”⁶

The covenant God keeps his end of the covenant agreement regardless of Israel’s faithlessness, and for that reason, he can speak tenderly to Jerusalem. For that reason he can speak comfort. Because their comfort **was coming**. Because God himself was assuring it by way of the coming comfort.

Crying Out

If you are following along in the text, you might have noticed that there is a lot of crying out in this chapter.

Here God says, ***cry out to Jerusalem about the comfort I am proclaiming.*** And in response to this command from God we read in Is. 40:3 ***that a voice cries.***

The answer to this question is the key to understanding this passage.

⁴ John N. Oswalt, 50.

⁵ Oswalt, 49.

⁶ Young, 19.

You see, Jerusalem has been in pain and suffering, and now there is a cry that will bring about her comfort.

What does that cry say? Let's look at v. 3.

We read:

V3 "A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.....v5 and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together...."

These verses help us understand why God is telling the people that Jerusalem's iniquity is pardoned and that the full measure of her sins has been dealt with.

Because these are the words John the Baptist speaks when he sees Jesus. And later he **cries out again, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** (John 1:29)

John the Baptist, using these words from Isaiah 40, is applying this very prophecy to Jesus. Jesus is the reason that God says, "comfort, comfort my people....her warfare is ended, her iniquity pardoned; she has received double for all her sins."

Jesus has taken upon himself the punishment of us all. This is the comfort of the nations!

Jesus dwelling with us

Sacred Road Illustration

Every year our youth travel to Yakima, WA, where we work with Sacred Road to minister to the Native Americans there for a week. The youth help out with many different projects and do a type of vacation bible school. But one of the most significant things they do, that really makes an impact in these children's lives, is to stoop down to their level. They get on the ground and color, play four square, and give them piggyback rides.

When they get down to their level and love them where they are, playing with matchbox cars or skip rope or whatever it may be, there is a deep connection that communicates volumes.

In a similar way, this evening we were able to hear a presentation from Brendan and Erin Connally. Alicia and I have had the privilege of connecting with them while we were in Peru and we quickly noted that they are some of the most qualified and gifted missionaries we know.

They just do missions right. They understand the culture and the inherent need for trust among the indigenous people. They enter into their homes, their kids play with the kids of the local area, they travel to their distant villages and enter into the lives of the people they minister to. This level of connection makes a world of a difference and makes the gospel they are presenting take on a whole new dimension in ways hours of teaching could never do in the culture. This is what missionaries call "incarnational missions."

The reason I bring this up is because this type of missions is called incarnational because it imitates the incarnational work of Jesus.

Jesus, being God, descended into the world, “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:7)

Jesus, called Immanuel, is “God with us.” This is God becoming incarnate.

Not only does Jesus take on all our sins, but he comes to dwell with us. To connect with us and suffer alongside us. He comes to show us the good news of the gospel and fulfill the important prophecy of comfort and of dwelling among us.

Simeon, a righteous and devout man who had been “*waiting for the consolation of Israel*,” held Jesus in his arms and blessed God for letting him see the salvation of the peoples, saying he could now depart in peace - because he recognized that Jesus was the consolation of Israel.

These days of Christmas we celebrate this incarnate consolation. We see in Jesus the comfort and the light of the nations. We see the savior of the whole world, and we see our very own comfort – God with us. The gospel incarnate.

God would have been just if he had sent us into eternal punishment. That was the deal – you break the law, and you pay the price. We did that and more.

But not only did God not do this to us, but instead he show us grace, he came into this world tenderly – as a babe in the manger – and dwelled among us.

See how much he loves us, how much he loves you? How he gets down in the ground incarnationally to show his love, to speak his love in a way that we would understand.

Not just through words, but in incarnational living he showed us his great love and comfort.

ILLUSTRATION

I had a friend named Matthew Stanmeyer when I was in elementary school. He had a basketball hoop that he would play on all the time and I wanted one too. One year at Christmas, I thought I would receive one. And instead I received a basketball. “You can play at Matthew’s house now with your own ball,” I think I heard. I was crushed. I thought the ball was an indicator of the basketball hoop. Kind of like a teaser. So my hopes were dashed.

A few seconds later my parents pulled out the massive box from behind the tree. A hoop!

In many ways, when Jesus was crucified, the hopes of the disciples were crushed. They thought their hope of salvation and comfort was gone. We know this because the disciples on the way to Emmaus felt like they had made a mistake.

But at the end of Matthew 28 we read that the story is not over. Yes, the disciples were not ushered into heaven immediately upon Jesus' arrival, and they would still need to wait, but their hopes weren't dashed. God's comfort would remain with them in an incredibly real way!

Jesus, before he left his disciples, said, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20b)

As if it were not enough that God has kept both sides of the covenant, and as if it were not enough for him to extend his mercy, and then send his one and only Son to this world, he continues to give us his comfort TODAY by being with us to the end of the age.

Jesus continues to comfort us through the Comforter – the Holy Spirit. He continues to speak tenderly to us after his resurrection!

While we live in this world, we will continue to endure the difficult suffering and hardships that a fallen world entails. We will suffer. Life will be hard.

We will suffer the loss of our abilities. We will lose our health, our friends, our family. We will have broken bones, broken hearts and broken lives. We will lose a lot and we will suffer in ways that we never expected. 2020 is not the end of our suffering.

We will continue to face and lose battles, face hardships and work challenges. We will struggle on the mission field, at church or in our workplace.

This world will always be a place of struggle and hardship. But that is not the end of the story. Not only will Jesus come to end all our warfare once and for all, he gives us the Holy Spirit now. That is a great comfort.

Dr. Kelly Kopic, one of my Covenant College profs explains in his book, *Embodied Hope*, that as Christians,

"we do not look at tears, hurt, and grief as good things; these are the very problems God promises to one day liberate us from. And yet, this side of glory, it is also true that God can and does bring about good in the midst of the dreadful..." [and through it] "we discover that God is faithful, **that he never leaves us nor forsakes us**. As Daniel's friend's Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego discovered, **God's faithfulness does not necessarily mean we will not face the flames, but it does mean that *he* will be *with his people in the midst of the flames*** (Daniel 3:8-30).⁷

⁷ Kelly Kopic, 161.

Paul wrote, in 2Cor. 4:8, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Paul could continue to persevere in the midst of hardships and suffering, and we can too, because Jesus has promised he will be with us. He allows us to face the flames of persecution, suffering, illness and so much more, and he has promised to be with us in the midst of those dreadful moments.

This is the greatest comfort we could ever ask for. Not only to know that one day God will end all our warfare once and for all, but that he cares intimately about our suffering and our greatest moments of need now.

When we have nothing to cling to, not our health, loved ones, our jobs, finances or success, we will find that we still have Jesus. And if we have nothing but Jesus, we have everything.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Kapic, Kelly M. *Embodied Hope: A Theological Meditation on Pain and Suffering*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017.

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Oswalt, John N. *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

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