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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
December 13, 2015
3rd Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons: Romans 2:12-16; Matthew 3:1-12
Hymns: 63; 61; 65; 73:5 (73:1-3)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 40:1-10

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended,

That her iniquity is pardoned;

For she has received from the LORD's hand

Double for all her sins.”

3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

5 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together;

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

6 The voice said, “Cry out!”

And he said, “What shall I cry?”

“All flesh is grass,

And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,

Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.”

9 O Zion,

You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;

O Jerusalem,

You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;

Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,
And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God my Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Comfort –

I don't know that we associate the word “comfort” with this season of the year. I was looking at some Christmas cards at a store yesterday. I saw some that said Joy and Peace and Love. Others spoke of Faith but comfort? Well, I suppose some might think of “comfort foods,” that fill our tables and are served at the various Christmas gatherings, but the Lord is talking about something much bigger and much more important than sitting before a nice warm fire on a cold winter's night. Our text is a command given by the Lord to the prophet, and not only to the Prophet Isaiah, but prophetically to the prophet whom we know as John the Baptist, and ultimately the actual mission of the greatest of all the prophets, Jesus Christ our Lord Through the prophets and through our Savior we see how --

THEME: God Comforts His People.

First of all and most wondrously we learn how God comforts His people --

I. With His Grace.

The Command of the Lord is given in our opening verses:

Isaiah 40:1-2 “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”

Says your God.

2 “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,

That her warfare is ended,

That her iniquity is pardoned;

For she has received from the LORD’s hand

Double for all her sins.”

To understand what this comfort is all about we need to understand what the **dis**comfort is that needs to be taken away. The verses of our text speak of a warfare that is being brought to an end. The warfare mentioned here is far more terrible than the temporal warfare among nations. One might shake one’s head at that. We see reports on the news, we’ve seen old newsreels. We should know all about the horrors of war. Man has devised unspeakable ways to wreak havoc on his fellow man. Atrocities have been an element of warfare since the first war was fought. Terror abounds as war spreads its violence among the nations. How can one even imagine something more horrible than the atom bombs exploding over Japan, or the death camps run by the Nazis?

The warfare between God and man is worse. Man holds God in enmity. By nature we regard our own Creator as our worst enemy. Because He would impose His will on our lives, for our good and blessings no less, **we rebel**. Rebellion and sin bring death. Not only temporal death, but that spiritual death which incites our enmity against God, and the eternal death of hell which holds horrors unimaginable.

These horrors come along with terrors of conscience. We are tormented within ourselves by our own guilt. Our mind tries to rationalize away the guilt that we feel over our sins, telling us that what we have done isn’t so bad; it’s not as evil as what others have done. There is little comfort to be found in such false thinking.

So then where is the comfort to be found? It is found in the amazing grace of our God. He brings us the message of pardon for our iniquities, of having received double for all of our sins. This isn't saying that we have somehow endured twice the punishment we deserve so that now we qualify for leniency. That could never be! It is saying that God has visited us with His grace in such greatness that all our sins are covered. "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). There should never be any doubt regarding the measure of God's forgiving grace. That we have received double for all of our sins says that there is more than enough grace found with a forgiving God to deliver us from all sin, from death and from the power of the devil. It is as Paul wrote to the Romans:

Romans 5:20-21 "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, ²¹ so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Double for all our sins, so great is God's grace toward us! And the comfort of this message never stops. No matter how serious our sin, God is willingly and able to forgive, not because of us and what we might be able to do for Him, but because of Christ and what Christ has done for us and for our salvation.

This comfort of the gospel takes hold when God comforts His people --

II. With the Gift of Repentance.

Isaiah 40: 3-4 The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert

A highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

These verses focus especially on John the Baptist and message he presented from the wilderness by the Jordan River. He called for the people to repent, but the power was not within their hearts. The

power of repentance came by the gospel in Word and sacrament. He baptized the people for the remission of their sins. It was the Holy Spirit taking hold of hearts by the gospel, taking hold of lives by faith that brought true repentance. Many turned away from their sin and sought to serve the Lord in their lives.

It is when the Spirit takes hold of our hearts and lives that the obstacles that stand in the way of the Lord and His grace are removed. The Spirit alone empowers us to believe, and to turn away from the sins which so easily ensnare us (Hebrews 12:1). And so the Spirit comforts us with His gifts of faith and sanctification as He sets us apart from sin and its guilt and power.

And yet many would still find troubling thoughts entering their minds in the middle of the night. God comforts His people –

III. With His Infallibility.

We think of the glory of the Lord as it relates to His wondrous power as seen in the marvel of His creation. We think of the glory of the Lord that will be revealed in Christ's return on the last day. However there is another way in which we observe the Lord's glory, and that is in His humble birth, and ultimately in His willing sufferings and death. In these acts of love and grace –

Isaiah 40:5-8 The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
And all flesh shall see it together;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

6 The voice said, “Cry out!”

And he said, “What shall I cry?”

“All flesh is grass,

And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,

Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades,

But the word of our God stands forever.”

It is too much to believe! How can we believe that which we have not seen with our eyes? How can it be that all flesh shall see the

glory of the Lord? Is it in His final judgment alone? Or is there something more?

The real brilliance of Christ's glory when He shall appear in holiness and great majesty shall be in the deliverance of His people from their sins. Is all this really true, this message of grace and peace in Christ Jesus? Many have decided that much of what the Bible says, even about Jesus, is only myth or fable. The start with the assumption that Scripture may be something from which we can draw some lesson, some moral imperative, but literal truth? Well they say, "Who can say?" Born of a virgin? Really? You believe that? Actually rose from the dead Physically rose? You believe that's true too?" **Yes, I believe! For this is the Word of the Lord!** Even though He lived and died so long ago, we focus on the details of His life and teaching for there our comfort is found!

The assurance of the Lord that comforts us is found in His infallibility, the reliability of His Word. **God never fails!** Man fails. We are like the grass of the field. God blows on it and it withers away; the flower lasts so short of time before it fades. Our mistake is thinking that this would be true of the Lord as well. It isn't at all! The Word of the Lord endures forever. What God says is true. What He has done is good for all time and on into eternity. We are comforted by His infallibility. Heaven and earth may pass away but the Lord's Word shall never pass away (Matthew 24:35)! His Word is truth (John 17:17)! We can rely on the forgiveness of God that is communicated to us in His Word, and we are comforted in all our distress.

Finally, we look for that ultimate comfort when the Lord shall comfort His people --

IV. With His Coming.

We are comforted in all our distress because the Lord has assured us that the evil of this present age shall all come to nothing at the great and glorious day of the Lord. So we are encouraged to praise the Lord!

Isaiah 40:9-10 O Zion,
You who bring good tidings,
Get up into the high mountain;

O Jerusalem,
You who bring good tidings,
Lift up your voice with strength,
Lift it up, be not afraid;
Say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"
10 Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,
And His arm shall rule for Him;
Behold, His reward is with Him,
And His work before Him.

Zion and Jerusalem were places that would witness the fulfillment of the Lord's advent as He came to deliver us from sin and death. There were indeed great glad tidings to proclaim from mount Zion! The message to the people was clear, "Behold your God!"

But now this message of the gospel has been entrusted to us. Let us recognize that when the Lord addresses Zion He is addressing us also. The Lord is telling us that we are the ones who bring good tidings. The message which has been entrusted to us is a message that should be broadcast to all the world. We are to tell it on the mountain! We should let all people know about the coming of the Lord. We should proclaim this message with strength and without fear. We represent the Lord Jesus and what we have to say to the world about Christ Jesus is, "**Behold your God!**"

In a little over a week we will be celebrating Jesus' birth on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We need to know that this Child born of Mary was no one less the Eternal Son of God who took on our flesh and blood. He became our brother so that He might work a great and powerful salvation. Jesus came into this world with a strong hand. **Jesus is powerful to save!** The forces of evil, whether they be from this world, or from the devil's lair were no match for the Mighty God who came to defeat the old evil foe. And as Christ was victorious so Jesus established His rule over all the earth. He rules the world with His truth and grace. He is the driving force in this world that all might see the evil perversity of man, and know that we deserve to be condemned, and also how the Lord, even in the face of this evil, drives forward with the gospel dispelling the darkness of sin and unbelief, and enlightening hearts everywhere with His gospel.

This power of the gospel cannot be defeated by the world. That is our comfort. The Word and Christ's kingdom shall stand forever. His reward is with Him. His reward is the Church, the people whom He has saved and called to be His own. This is all the reward that Christ desires, even your salvation! He came and fulfilled all for the salvation His people. And we are comforted!

Isaiah 40:1-2 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!"

Says your God. 2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD's hand Double for all her sins."

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.