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St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
2100 16<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Austin, MN 55912-1749  
Pastor Ted Barthels  
Sermon preached on  
December 10, 2017  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent

Scripture Lessons: 2 Peter 2:8-13, Mark 1:1-8  
Hymns: 66; 63; 61; 779:1 (73:1-3)

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

Sermon Text: Isaiah 40:1-8

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God.

<sup>2</sup>“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.”

<sup>3</sup>The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the LORD;  
Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be exalted  
And every mountain and hill brought low;  
The crooked places shall be made straight  
And the rough places smooth;

<sup>5</sup>The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
And all flesh shall see *it* together;  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
Surely the people *are* grass.

<sup>8</sup>The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever.” (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

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

In Christ Jesus, our Coming Lord, dear fellow Redeemed:

**INTRO: John the Baptist**

John the Baptist is one of the most significant prophets or messengers of God to be found in all of Scripture. Every Advent season it is an important part of our preparation for observing our Savior's birth to review the message of John the Baptist and how that message applies to us.

We are told that John was the forerunner for Jesus. John was only three months older than Jesus, and so since Jewish law determined that one did not begin a teaching ministry until the age of thirty, John's ministry began a mere three months before Jesus' ministry began with Jesus coming to John to be baptized by Him in the Jordan River.

In those three months John proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom that could be established by Jesus the Christ who was to come into the world. In proclaiming the coming of the kingdom John was directing the people to the One who was to come after him. John declared himself to be unworthy to even perform the lowliest of tasks of loosening Jesus' sandal straps, so great, so mighty, so glorious was the coming Savior.

Our text this morning is one of the prophecies that foretold the coming of John the Baptist, and it captures the significant aspects of John's message. So on the basis of this prophecy of Isaiah let us consider from the perspective of John's message of repentance --

**THEME: The Glory of the Lord's Coming.**

We first observe --

**I. His Glory in Comforting His People.**

**Isaiah 40:1-2** “Comfort, yes, comfort My people!” Says your God.  
<sup>2</sup>“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.”

We need to recall the context in which Isaiah wrote these words. For most of his ministry Isaiah was a prophet of doom. Isaiah declared judgment upon the northern kingdom of Israel, which would come during Isaiah’s ministry at the hands of the Assyrians. Isaiah warned of judgment then also for the kingdom of Judah, judgment which would befall them later at the hands of the Babylonians. For the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah there is recorded warning after warning of judgment to come because of the people’s impenitence, but then, at the beginning of the this fortieth chapter, one reads, “**Comfort, yes, comfort My people! Says your God.**”

What a marvelous if not sudden change in tone. The Lord, who was justly fed up with the blatant and horrendous sin of the people of Judah, leading to the harsh judgment that would befall the nation, suddenly speaks of comfort to this people. These were not empty words like, “don’t worry, everything will be alright,” when no one could possibly see how anything would ever be right again. No, these words of comfort were backed up with assurances from the Lord. **Judah’s warfare is over.** Actually the war with Babylon hadn’t even begun. This is prophetic, and it wasn’t the war with Babylon that was of concern. It was the people’s rebellion against God. That was over when God in grace would deliver the people from sin and death. This could only happen by God’s grace. In His grace the Lord declared them pardoned from their sins. Their iniquity, literally their crookedness was forgiven as if there was not any guilt or cause for condemnation to be found in this people.

As one reads the historical record of the Old Testament one might rightly wonder, “How could this be?” They were as guilty as sin. Their guilt couldn’t have been more obvious. The answer to the question is truly significant. It is grace, grace so large that it is beyond human comprehension. The Lord assures the people that they have received twice as much forgiving grace as might be required to pardon their offenses. **Twice** as much! If there was no

doubt about their wickedness, there should be even less doubt about the greatness of God's forgiving grace.

And this is where we are blessed to take up this message which was also in the mouth of John the Baptist, and hear it with our own ears! God speaks to us of comfort. He desires that we be comforted in our affliction. He desires that we understand that in spite of our sin, the frequency of our sin, the severity of our sin, the hurtfulness of our sin, the depth and blackness of our sin, the extreme crookedness of our sinful hearts, we are pardoned by our God. How can this be? We know the extent of our sin, and yet we are assured by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul:

**Romans 5:20-21** "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more,<sup>21</sup> so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

So yes, the law reveals exactly how rebelliously sinful we are! Yes, sin reigned in death! We know we deserve nothing but punishment, but where there is much sin, there is even more grace, more grace than we can even begin to comprehend. The Lord comforts us with His grace, more grace, more than double for all our sins! Such is the richness of God's grace that we have received from the Lord's hand.

And that grace changes everything. It certainly changes the way we perceive the Lord in His glory. What we now see for ourselves is --

## **II. His Glory Changing Men's Hearts.**

So the message of God for the Prophet Isaiah, and the message of God delivered through John the Baptist continues:

**Isaiah 40:3-5** "The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the LORD;

Make straight in the desert A highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be exalted

And every mountain and hill brought low;

The crooked places shall be made straight

And the rough places smooth;

<sup>5</sup>The glory of the LORD shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see *it* together;  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

John was that voice in the wilderness. It wasn't so much that John was out preaching and baptizing in a deserted place by the Jordan River as it was a spiritual wilderness in which people hadn't a clue regarding a true and peaceful relationship with the Lord. Daily repentance is the only appropriate response to this gospel of God's gracious love and forgiveness. It was John's message that the people of the Jews were to be preparing the way of the Lord. The picture language in our text is so appropriate. Iniquity is crookedness of heart. The crooked was to be made straight. The hills and valleys, the “ups and downs” of people's spirituality, were to be leveled out. It was no longer supposed to be that Sabbath day righteousness was regarded as good enough, or that the letter of the law was satisfactory when the heart was still perverse.

To that end John came preaching repentance and baptizing for the washing away of sins. John presented that same wondrous gospel outlined for us so beautifully in our text, and John accompanied that with the call to change lives in response to that gospel proclamation. They were to bring forth fruits fitting repentance.

That is the message that we need to hear yet today. As we gather around the Word and hear the Lord assuring us of forgiveness for all our sins, and righteousness in Jesus' merits, that message changes hearts. It turns cold stony hearts to hearts of flesh, warm hearts beating with the love of Christ. It is that power of the gospel that enables us to not only recognize our own personal spiritual pitfalls, but to fill them in, so we don't stumble in faith. We are enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit to say “NO” to sin, and “YES” to righteousness. We learn from the example of John's humility, and humble ourselves before the Lord, knocking down the pride that tells us that we don't need God's righteousness, that ours is just fine, or that we don't need the Lord's power to turn away from sin and lust, that our will power can do it alone. Such spiritual pride is unfit for the Lord. We are saved by grace, through faith in Christ alone!

This is the right time for us to reexamine our lives, and the attitude of our hearts. As we anticipate our Christmas observance we are

eagerly anticipating the celebration of our Savior's birth. He who sat on the throne of God condescended to come into the flesh and to be our brother, to live under the law, so that He could bear our sin, our grief, our curse. And He took it all on Himself and carried it to the cross where He died for us. Such love and devotion directed to undeserving sinners like us! So recall how Peter challenged us in our epistle lesson: "*What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, <sup>12</sup>looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God?*" (2 Peter 3:11-12)

How can we who are so weak find our way to a life of true repentance? Through --

### III. The Glory of the Eternal Word.

**Isaiah 40:6-8** 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.

<sup>7</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,

Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;

Surely the people *are* grass.

<sup>8</sup> The grass withers, the flower fades,

But the word of our God stands forever."

Is there any other Scripture which so accurately and succinctly characterizes the weakness of man, the weakness of our flesh?

Even as the grass withered in the hot sun and wind as it blew in in the Judah in the hot summers, or as the Santa Anna winds blow now in California, so is man. When those hot winds come blowing down out of the mountains the lush grasses quickly dry up and become tinder for wild fires. So we quickly dry up and fade away, and even our best works are no better than the flowers of the field. We admire them for a day, but then the flowers fade and the glory is gone. Just that fast and it is gone! Just that fast and WE are gone! And for just this reason, for this reminder of our transitory nature, we read these words over the graves of our loved ones, because we don't find our comfort in their accomplishments or the length of their days, be they short or long.

Where do we find our strength and comfort? We find it in the sure and eternal Word of the Lord! Even as the glory of man and his

accomplishments fade quickly, so the Word of the Lord endures forever. His promises, His grace, His salvation, that glory of the Lord in Jesus Christ our living and glorified Savior, that Word ENDURES FOREVER! That is our comfort and assurance for life. Every word and every promise of the Lord is sure.

So, as we now prepare for the Lord's coming and the appearance of His kingdom, be it the kingdom of His grace in our hearts, or the Kingdom of His glory in His return, let us comprehend the true glory of the Lord. We see the Glory of the Lord in the Wonder of His forgiving grace with which He comforts His people. We see the Lord's Glory as He came down to earth to be our Brother, and entered into our hearts and changed our lives. We see His glory stand out in sharp contrast to our lowliness as He presents us with life and hope and eternal salvation in the sure promises of His Word, the Word that endures forever.

**AMEN.**

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)