

Isaiah 40:1-5
“Unending Encouragement”
Nativity of John the Baptist

June 24, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
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Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1)

Back in 1996, visitors of Bridger Wilderness Area in Wyoming filled out comment cards about what they thought of the park. They included the following:

- Trails need to be wider so people can walk while holding hands.
- Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.
- Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spiderwebs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests.
- Please pave the trails so they can be snowplowed during the winter.
- Chairlifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.
- The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.
- A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed?
- Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.
- A McDonald’s would be nice at the trailhead.
- The places where trails do not exist are not well marked.

Wow! As Americans, we do like to be comfortable. But that is *too* comfortable. Hopefully, these people were joking, because that is laziness.

Thankfully, that is not what God is saying.

When God says, ***“Comfort, comfort my people”***, He is actually saying: ***“Be encouraged!”***

You see, we are not alone in our lives. God is always there, right at our side.

[Babylon topples Jerusalem]

Now, when Isaiah wrote these inspired Words of God, the people of Jerusalem were unsure on if God was at their side, or even if God was there at all.

They questioned God because in 587 BC, Babylon unleashed against Jerusalem its policies of urbicide – the destruction of the city’s architecture – and ecocide – the wiping out of the environment.

Jerusalem was being destroyed. The Jewish heritage was being destroyed. The Babylonians were destroying anything that once proclaimed the God of the Hebrews.

For the Jews, it looked as though the Babylonian gods of Marduk and Nebo had triumphed over the God of Israel. It seemed that the God of Israel was no match for these foreign deities.

Or, perhaps it was worse than that. Maybe the God of Israel chose not to defend His people, because His people rejected Him.

Or, what if the God of Israel did not even exist? What if Israel’s trust in Him had been all in vain?

These thoughts were circling in the heads of the Jews.

They only saw a future without hope. The only thing reasonable was to face the facts. It was time to forget God and deal with life in the best way possible.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended” (Isaiah 40:1-2a).

Yes, Jerusalem’s warfare was ended. The Jews lost their home and were sent into exile.

What comfort is this? They lost it all: their homes and their livelihoods.

Have you ever felt that your future lacked hope? Have you ever felt that it was time to forget God and just move on with life apart from God?

We may think, “Well, why is God allowing His church on earth to shrink? Why doesn’t He do something about it?”

Or, “I’m struggling paying my bills and I’m a good Christian, so why can’t I get ahead?”

Or, “Where is God in all of this pain and destruction?”

[A Voice Cries...]

It may seem like God is far off. But, He isn’t. The Triune God is not finished with His people. He wasn’t finished with those Israelites back then. He surely isn’t finished with His flock today!

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (Isaiah 40:3)

This voice is the voice of John the Baptist, who we celebrate today. This is John proclaiming, “The warfare is ended, repent, be baptized, for the Savior is coming.”

John’s vocation was to be the ***“prophet of the Most High, to go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of sins”*** (Luke 1:76-77).

And proclaim the coming of Jesus, he did.

Today, preachers continue to proclaim the coming of the Lord. For as Martin Luther says, “Faith and repentance must be received from a voice.” That is, through the public preaching of the Word of God. It must be heard and received from a speaking voice. (AE 17:8)

For Paul wrote, ***“But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”*** (Romans 10:14)

So even today, the voice cries in today’s wilderness with the preaching and teaching of God’s true Word that is the same yesterday, today and forever.

For only through hearing God’s Word do we have comfort and encouragement.

As God's people, we are those who need comfort because we have been wounded and terrified by the Law and are empty vessels capable of receiving comfort. For, as Luther said, "Only those who are afflicted have comfort and are capable of it." (AE 17:3)

[The Glory of the Lord]

As John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus' First Coming, we continue to prepare for Christ's Second Coming.

For, we know "***the glory of the Lord***" (Isaiah 40:5) that was revealed.

God's glory was revealed in His Son – Our Savior – Jesus the Christ.

When we hear the voice crying: "***Prepare the way of the Lord.***" We should remember what Jesus Himself said: "***I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me***" (John 14:6)

Jesus Christ is the only way to God the Father. Jesus is the highway to salvation.

By grace we're saved through not the merit of our own, but through the merit of Christ, who purchased and redeemed us by His death and resurrection from the grave. For Christ's death and resurrection displayed the glory of the Lord.

It is God's unending love that gives us comfort. It is God's unending love that gives us encouragement.

Right when things look bad, there is God lifting us up. We sin against God and so we don't deserve grace, but there He is offering us forgiveness when we confess our sins.

Christ is here with us today offering us comfort and forgiveness through His spoken Word. He is here offering us comfort and forgiveness in eating and drinking His body and blood at the Lord's Supper.

So, be comforted and encouraged that God will never leave or forsake His flock, for the mouth of the Lord Jesus has spoken: "***I know my own and my own know Me. My peace I leave with you.***" Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠