

Prepare the Way

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Let's turn together in the Book of Isaiah, as we begin this first sermon in the advent series, "The Advent Conspiracy." God's divine conspiracy against sin and death. The season of advent is about waiting. Waiting is a discipline. Waiting is hard to do—very hard to do. But perhaps waiting for something good, for something hopeful, is not so hard when what you're surrounded by is brokenness and difficulty and challenge. That's precisely this prophesy that Isaiah gives. It comes seven hundred years prior to the birth of Christ. That's a long time to wait. But also, it comes at a time when the nation of Israel most needed to hear a word of hope. They were living in exile—at least a portion of Israel was. Judah, Jerusalem, was about to go into exile. And they were wondering, "What is going to happen to us?"

Just a chapter before the one we are going to look at this morning, the nation is being led by a great king, Hezekiah, who feared the Lord and honored God in all that he did. Close to the end of his life, he almost died, and the Lord restored his life. But after his restoration, perhaps in pride, perhaps who knows what, Hezekiah decided to receive visitors who had heard that he was sick from an enemy nation. Hezekiah invites them into the palace and literally shows them every closet, every room, every ounce of gold—shows them everything. This displeased the Lord, because Hezekiah was opening himself up to giving his enemies a show of his strength, but in relying on that strength it became his weakness. And the message to Hezekiah, the message to Israel, was one of discipline—was one of very great difficulty—and they would go into complete exile, no longer in the land but now being in the hands of their enemies.

That is what precedes this word. It is very much like today. The church is in exile. It is no longer at the center of people's conversations or questions. So sometimes people grow discouraged; where is the Lord? What is He doing? What are His plans? This comes as a word of hope not only to Israel; it comes as a word of hope to the body of Christ, his church. So hear now Isaiah, chapter forty, verses one through eleven, when the Lord announces: prepare the way.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
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.

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

A voice says, "Cry!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God!"
Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. May God bless the preaching of His Word.

So, as we see these verses, verses one through eleven, it breaks up into very manageable chunks because there are three groups of verses. None of them are singular; they are plural. And what we see in these voices are announcements. One is proclamation. Another is the announcement of preservation. And third, the announcement of provision. Proclamation, preservation, and provision. Sorry to go alliteration this morning, but I hope it's helpful.

So, let's look at proclamation this morning, as we see what is being announced in these verses to the people of Israel. First it says:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
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.

The proclamation that is being given there is twofold; first, it is the gift of grace that is being announced there. That proclamation of the gift of grace is seen twofold; first, it is seen in the fact that in saying "your warfare is finished; you can rest," the announcement is: "the Sovereign Lord is coming—the One who will be over His people, who will protect His people." Even in the midst of coming out of

announcement of exile—even in exile—God promises to keep and hold a people as a remnant to himself, and they will not have to see war, but rather, they will receive the protection of the Lord’s goodness.

The second part of that grace is given, though it seems encoded when translated into English when it says that the sins of Israel—the people of Jerusalem—“her iniquity is pardoned.” That is clear. But then this phrase: “that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” It makes it sound as though, though she has received pardon, she has also received judgment that is—what?—double for all her sins. That’s the way it reads in English. Except in the beauty and richness of Hebrew, it has exactly the opposite meaning. It is this: when it says that she, her sins will be pardoned, it literally means that her sins will be atoned for and will be done for in double-fashion. The word that is translated from Hebrew into “double”, we think multiples. We think numbers. But what the Hebrew is communicating is a picture of image. Specifically, mirror image. So on the one hand you have the sin and iniquity of Israel and the people of Jerusalem, but what is received in return is pardon and atonement through grace that matches the exact need of the people. The grace matches the sin. The grace covers the sin. So what is being portrayed here is that God’s announcement is comfort, comfort. And by the way, the verb tense of that “comfort, comfort, and speak tenderly,” is an ongoing action in Hebrew, meaning continually, over and over again, “comfort, comfort, speak tenderly.” And what is the message? The message is: “Your warfare is ended. Your sins are atoned for. My grace is more than sufficient.”

But this proclamation isn’t just an announcement of the gift of grace; it is also an announcement of glory to be revealed. And here, the passage takes on meaning that requires that we use our imagination, when it says these words: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 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.” The glory of the Lord will come to His people not when they are out of exile, not when they are out of the desert, but rather, the Lord comes to where the people are. He has come into our midst. He comes into the exile with his people. So that’s why it says “make a way in the desert.” The Lord will come to them.

Secondly, when it says, “every mountain lifted up and every valley made low”, it means to jar our mind, to have us have this image of—when something crumbles, when the earth shakes and things fall down and things that are rough are made smooth, it’s not an easy process. In fact, it is fearful process. It is tumultuous. It turns things upside down in preparation. It means this: that in every place in the Old Testament where the coming of the glory of the Lord is, so there is something else there among the people—fear. [Fear] that the Almighty God of glory in all of His weight and all of His splendor and all of His presence will come and it will shake things to their core. It means this: that in this word, there isn’t just good news; there is also a hard news. That when the Lord comes, we are to fear, because when the Lord comes, he makes everything new. That is not an easy process. It’s a beautiful one—but it is not easy.

Consider the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote from a German prison during Nazi occupied Germany in World War II. When he was rebelling against the Nazi campaign as a preacher and theologian, he wrote letters to his parents. This was among them, as he thought about himself in prison, as he thought about advent—this is what he says:

The coming of God is truly not only a joyous message, but is, first, frightful news for anyone who has a conscience. And only when we have felt the frightfulness of the matter can we know the incomparable favor. God comes in the midst of evil, in the midst of death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And in judging it, he loves us, he purifies us, he sanctifies us, he comes to us with his grace and love. We are often indifferent to this message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it, and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to people of our little earth, and lays claims to us.

The announcement of God’s grace is also the announcement and pronouncement of God’s coming in glory, and with that glory, there will be both judgment and the grace. But how does He do it? The

passage tells us when it gives us this phrase: preservation. Look at verses six through eight. If this is both good news and bad news, how does the Lord work it all together? Notice what he says, in preservation—if you look at verse six, when he says, “A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.” And that famous quote that many of you have heard whether you’ve ever darkened the door of a church—“The grass withers and the flowers fall.” And we’re accustomed to hearing the second part, “but the word of the Lord stands forever.” But the text begins by saying this: yes, the grass withers and the flowers fall—“the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.”

What he’s doing is, though, is he’s saying there’s good news and bad news. He’s doing what? He’s preserving us. Why? Because he’s inviting those who hear—Isaiah is, through the Word of the Lord—he’s inviting all of us through the invitation to wisdom. That wisdom that is here in this passage that we’re invited to participate in is to recognize our human limitations. Our human limitations are this: that we could never exhaust how beautiful, how gracious, how glorious is our God. We could never exhaust it. But as human beings who are weak in the flesh, the end of our days will be weak with exhaustion, for the grass withers and the flowers fade. And the invitation to wisdom is to recognize our human limitations and contrast that with God’s omnipotent power, that God comes and simply by the breath of His mouth, by the word of His mouth, everything is laid bare. So he’s inviting us to recognize the wisdom of our limitations but the all-powerful nature of who God is. He’s saying, it’s only in the recognition of our weakness that we see the true strength of who God is.

But then, he adds to it, does he not? That second part. When he repeats the phrase again, he ends it differently. This time, instead of the breath of the Lord laying waste to the grass, he says this: “Though the grass fades and the flowers fall, the word of our God will stand forever.” So he moves from an invitation to wisdom, to what? Finding refuge in the power of God’s Word. So, here’s how the Lord takes both good news and bad news and offers it to us as an invitation. He’s saying, “Look at your lives. Look at the world around you. Does not the grass fade? Are not human limitations laid bare to you every day?” And because of our sin and rebellion, we know in this life brokenness. “But,” he says, “the Lord’s word stands forever.” He means for us to find a refuge and strength and shield through that word.

You may wonder where I get that. It’s because it’s part of a fuller expression of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter forty, just a few verses later, verse twenty-eight and following, he says these words: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom.” We cannot exhaust how great He is. But then listen to this:

Though we grow in exhaustion, He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and the young men stumble and fall, but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.

The invitation to wisdom and the pronouncement and the provision of the power of God’s Word—what does God’s Word say? He says, “I will be your shield and protector. I will be your strength. I will raise you up. I will enable you to persevere.” The Lord invites us in advent, just as He was inviting his people, to find their strength in the midst of their weakness. The only preservation is the wisdom of the Word of God that says, “I am the everlasting God. I will bring salvation. And you will not be weary, and you will not be faint.” The Lord invites us into His preservation.

But He’s not done yet. And this is the reason why Luther—Martin Luther of the Reformation—said these eleven verses have packed into them all of the gospel. In the midst of this proclamation, in the midst of this provision, how will the Lord do this? That is what He does. He provides. In verses nine through eleven, this is what he says, again—they are to announce what it tells us as literally the good news, the evangelism, of the gospel. Announce it to Jerusalem, to all the cities of Judah: do not fear. Why? It says in

verse ten: “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.” He’s saying that in the midst of the proclamation and the preservation, that the way the Lord is going to do this is by providing a warrior. Verse ten: “Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.” What it means is that this warrior comes, mighty in power, and what He will do is He will lead His people into victory. Because what He says is, “his reward is with him; his recompense is before him.” Meaning that when this warrior comes, He will come to lead His people in victory because his reward is already His. The victory is already announced. Why? Because God is coming as a warrior, and He will serve as a strong arm for His people.

What kind of warrior will He be? It seems in verse ten to be speaking of a warrior that comes mighty in battle, with sword and shield and arrows, with a mighty army and wonderful horses and chariots and great battlement, ready to go to war against the enemies of His people. But that is not the kind of warrior that is spoken of here, because verse eleven tells us that this is not a warrior like anything we could ever have imagined. It will be a warrior shepherd. Listen to what he says: “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.” These words would be the words that would be announced through John the Baptist: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Every hill be let down, every valley be lifted up, for I come preaching about the one who is coming.”

And who is this warrior shepherd? It is Jesus Christ. Consider it for just a moment. Now, in the totality of all these eleven verses, that the Lord comes with mighty, sovereign authority, and what does he proclaim? That I will bring atonement for the sins of my people. You will give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from his sins. Jesus would go to the cross as an atonement, as Paul would say, as propitiation, as one who would remove the wrath of God from his people and from sin, and provide a full payment. Jesus would say, “It is finished.” It is Jesus who comes as the one who gives the provision and the invitation to wisdom, to recognize our limitations. “Come unto me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

How will he do that? He will do that by the word of his mouth. And he says, “You can do nothing apart from me.” He would send forth his Holy Spirit, that that word would always be with his people, that the Spirit would remind us of everything that the Lord had taught. That is what we are to teach. Proclamation, preservation, now provision. It is Jesus who comes as a mighty warrior—not to a field surrounded by army men and chariots and swords; he would go to a battlefield that was the cross. And he would lead his people to victory not by taking the sword in his hand, but by allowing others to take the sword in their hands to pierce his side. It would be Jesus who would lead his people as a warrior, but also as a warrior shepherd, when Jesus would say of himself in that wonderful passage of John chapter ten:

I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep, and my sheep know me. Just as the Father knows me, I know the Father, and I laid down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep who are not of this sheep pen; I must bring them also. They too shall listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I laid down my life only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

He is the warrior shepherd, and he comes not as one that anyone would expect, but clothed in flesh as a child. To be raised up, the warrior shepherd of God for those who believe. He comes by authority given to him, and he lays down his life for the salvation and rescue of his people. He raises up his life again as a victor over sin and death, to lead his people with a strong arm. Praise be to God, there is not a soul here this morning to whom the Lord does not say—no matter where you are, no matter what your background, no matter what your sin, no matter what bondage you may be facing, he comes to you as a shepherd, and he lifts you up by his hands, and he holds you in his arms close to his heart. He is your ever-present help and strength. So he can say to you, and to me, as those who are reenacting advent, that

“I have come that you may have life. I have come to take on your sin, that you might receive my victory.” This is the blessed promise.

For those who are now here after the resurrection of Jesus Christ continued also in act the advent and awaiting his return, when the Lord will come again at the announcement of a battle trumpet, and in his hands all authority has been given to judge the living and the dead. He invites every one of us to prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare your hearts. How are you waiting? Are you waiting as those who've received a gift in the midst of exile? Longing and joyful and thankful that the warrior shepherd has come on your behalf? Or do you not know Him at all? The invitation to know Him is here this morning. Prepare the way of the Lord, and He will lift you up. He will hold you in His arms. He will enable you to run in this life, to be His people in this world, to bring about beauty and grace and mercy. This is what advent is about: the Lord has come. Let us go before the Lord in prayer, thanking Him for this wonderful, wonderful announcement from Isaiah.

Lord, you are good, and your love endures forever. Lord, we pray that you would help us by your Holy Spirit to prepare our hearts as we celebrate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as we today await his coming again. We do not know when that day will be, but we take great comfort that the warrior shepherd has already come to show us the way, to provide refuge and strength, salvation and purpose. Now, oh Lord, as those who've been called to respond to the great giving of your gift, we give you thanks and praise. In the mighty name of our Heavenly Father, the gracious and glorious Savior Jesus, and the power and presence of your Spirit, we pray. Amen.