

Comfort for Exiles

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[0 : 00] Be seated. Well, one of my favorite Advent traditions that I try to do every year is to go and see Handel's Messiah.

And last night, Molly and I had the opportunity to go see it at the National Cathedral. And if you've ever gotten the chance to see it there, it's an amazing, beautiful setting to see this masterpiece of music that was written by George Friedrich Handel in 1741.

And it has become one of the most well-known, one of the most often performed pieces of music in history. And the music itself is, of course, masterful.

But what's so amazing, if you've ever heard it or seen it performed, is that all the words are directly from Scripture. It tells the story of redemption straight from the Bible.

Handel set the message of redemption to music. And it is absolutely beautiful. And it about brings me to tears almost every time I listen to it. And three of the very first songs, in fact, there's five in total, that actually, of Handel's Messiah, actually come straight from our text this morning, Isaiah chapter 40.

[1 : 21] And part of what I love about the Messiah is that I think it beautifully captures the tone and the mood of Isaiah 40, which is one of God speaking words of comfort to his people.

And I promise you, I'm not gonna sing Isaiah 40 this morning, much to your joy, but I'm gonna preach it. And hopefully, we'll hear God's words of comfort to us this morning.

The background to Isaiah chapter 40 is the Babylonian exile. Chapters one through 39 of the prophet Isaiah are about what is happening in Isaiah's day before the exile, when the kingdom of Assyria is the major threat.

And there comes this turning point in the book of Isaiah in chapter 39, when King Hezekiah makes a foolish decision. He welcomes ambassadors from the kingdom of Babylon, a kingdom that's not yet a threat.

And he gives these ambassadors, these envoys, a tour of his whole palace and armory and the temple. And he shows them all the silver and gold and all his wealth in the palace and all of his storehouses.

[2 : 45] And by the way, if you happen to work in foreign policy, I would not recommend this as a strategy for foreign policy because chapter 39 ends with the prophet Isaiah telling King Hezekiah, the time will surely come when everything that you've just showed, these ambassadors from Babylon, and that all that your predecessors have stored up until this day will be carried off into exile.

And a couple generations later, that is exactly what happened. God had sent Israel prophet after prophet, warning after warning, until he finally allowed Jerusalem to be captured by the Babylonians.

And his people were forced from their homes and torn from everything that was familiar to them and taken to a foreign land in tears.

And Isaiah, though he lived in the time before the exile, God gave him the prophetic task of writing these words to an audience centuries in the future.

And it's to people living in the pain and the grief and the disorientation of exile that God speaks these words of comfort here in Isaiah chapter 40.

[4 : 07] And even though we may not be living in a literal exile today, we need these words of comfort and consolation just as much as they did because all of us, if we're honest, face the pain and grief and difficult circumstances of life in a fallen world, which is in its own way its own experience of exile, of feeling far from home, of feeling like this world is not our true home, it's not the way it's supposed to be.

Perhaps this morning, as you come into the season of Advent, you have felt this more heavily this year or in recent months than in any other season of your life.

Maybe you're coming into the season of Advent not with celebration and joy, but with tears and with grief and wrestling with God.

And if that's you, I wanna invite you to listen to what's here in Isaiah chapter 40 this morning. I wanna invite you to listen to three voices of comfort. Three voices of comfort.

Here in Isaiah 40, we see a voice of assurance, a voice of hope, and a voice of love. A voice of assurance, a voice of hope, and a voice of love.

[5 : 34] So first of all, we see here in this passage that we are comforted with a voice of assurance. I wonder how you imagine God's voice sounds like.

I wonder what the tone is. I wonder what the mood is when you imagine God's voice. Is it a deep bass voice that sounds like Morgan Freeman? Is it super spiritual and high-pitched and angelic?

Is it dry and boring? Is it harsh and condemning? It's interesting. Notice how verses one and two start with this. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. The tone in God's voice here is one of tenderness, gentleness, comfort.

He's bringing them a message of consolation. And what is that message? We see in verse three, 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.

[6 : 54] God is speaking a word of comfort to his people here about the forgiveness of their sins. The people in Israel knew why they were in exile. They were rightly receiving God's discipline for generations of unfaithfulness, idolatry, rebellion.

And I wonder what it would have been like to sit around a Jewish dinner table in exile in Babylon. I wonder what sorts of things would have been said.

I wonder what things would have gone unsaid. I wonder what questions would have been asked. I wonder what fears and sorrows would have been expressed around that dinner table in Babylon.

And I have to imagine, whether it went said or unsaid, that one of the questions they wrestled with in exile is this, are we beyond God's forgiveness?

Did we sin too greatly? Did we go too far? Are we past the boundaries of God's mercy? But God says to his people here in Isaiah 40, not only are you not beyond the scope of my mercy and forgiveness, but in fact, I have already forgiven you.

[8 : 17] I'm not waiting for your exile to be over, for your sins to be atoned for. It's not the exile that's atoning for your sins. I have already atoned for them myself.

And in fact, I have given you double for all your sins. This is the image of a double portion. A double portion is something that is overflowing with extravagance and generosity beyond what is expected or even necessary.

God is saying, I've done way more than just forgiven you. In fact, I'm here to comfort you and to assure you that you're still mine, that you still belong to me, that you're forgiven.

Though Israel had to endure God's discipline for a short time, it was impossible for them to have sinned too greatly to be beyond God's mercy.

And this is a word of comfort that they needed to hear in the exile, and this is a word of comfort that we need to hear today. Do you ever wonder if you can have real and lasting assurance that you are right with God?

[9 : 29] Have you ever wondered that perhaps maybe he forgave you for those things in your past, but maybe now you've, maybe now you've gone too far.

Maybe you've crossed a line. Maybe you've, now you're past the point of no return. You're past the boundaries of God's mercy that maybe God's patience has run out on you. And if that's you, hear these words of comfort and assurance that is here in this text.

We can know that we can have real assurance in the forgiveness of our sins not because of anything that we have done, but because of what we see here in verse two, that forgiveness is something that comes from the hand of the Lord.

It is given and received not something that is earned or achieved. Our assurance is not based in our character, but in the character of God.

And yes, it's true. Like Israel, sometimes we do have to experience the Lord's discipline for a season. Sometimes we do have to face the real painful consequences for our sin.

[10 : 39] but even still, we cannot out-sin the mercy of God. There is more mercy in God than there is sin in us.

And the tender heart of God longs to comfort us with the news that our sins are forgiven, to assure us that we are His, that we belong to Him.

And that's the first voice that we see. We are comforted with a voice of assurance about God's forgiveness. But the second voice that we see is a voice of hope.

We are comforted with a voice of hope. During my first year in seminary in St. Louis, I found myself in a room with a counselor.

And it was that, in that first year of seminary that I was stumbling for the first time and trying to unpack the complexity of my inner life.

[11 : 49] And part of what that counselor helped me do, and maybe a counselor has helped do this for you, but part of what he helped me do is to learn how to name and process my grief.

I didn't realize it, but there were a lot of things that I was grieving. And as a good counselor does, he picked up on it. And I distinctly remember him saying one thing to me in one of our sessions, and he says, Jeff, it sounds like you think that your best days are behind you.

And I'll always remember that because he hit the nail on the head because he was able to articulate my grief in a way that I wasn't. And that named for me what I felt like was the grief under the grief.

And the grief under the grief was I felt like that the glory days were gone never to return again. And I think if we go back to that Jewish dinner table in Babylon in exile, I wonder if this was a question on their minds as well.

Are the glory days behind us? Is our story over? Has it come to an end? Israel, of course, had a clear sense of its own story.

[13 : 03] They were the people that God had rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought into the wilderness, brought through the wilderness into the promised lands to be a light to the nations. And yet now it seemed like they were back in slavery, back in the wilderness.

It seemed to them that maybe their story had come to an end, that maybe their best days were behind them, that the glory days were over. And it's to this group of people that God, through the prophet Isaiah, speaks a comforting word of hope.

Verse three, 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.

This image of a highway is an ancient image for when a road would be constructed over rough terrain as a processional route for a king coming into a city so that all of his chariots and horses and soldiers could pass through on smooth ground.

[14 : 26] And Isaiah says that this is what is going to happen when God comes. He is going to come as a king and he is going to come and reveal his glory to the world.

And that when he does, his rule is gonna transform the whole creation. all of the unjust power structures that oppress people, all of the sin and idolatry that dehumanize people, all of the hatred and all of the violence that divide people, all of the rough terrain is gonna be smoothed out when God the king comes and reveals his glory.

And this is an incredible word of hope that God is speaking to Israel that their story doesn't end in exile but with the glory of God transforming the whole creation.

And not just them but all flesh, all creation, all the nations of the earth are gonna see it. And God offers us the same hope that if we, if you belong to him that your story, your individual story is bound up in the transformation of all things and the revelation of the glory of God to all people.

And because that's true, your story is far from over. Your best days aren't behind you, they're ahead of you. And so if life for you feels like exile or wilderness right now because of grief or pain or difficult circumstances, if that's you, let me invite you to see what is here in this text.

[16 : 21] That it's in those places. It's in the wilderness. It's in exile where God comes to reveal his glory and to smooth out the rough places.

He comes in the desert. He comes in the valleys. He comes in the rough places to reveal his glory to the world.

That is where God comes and transforms the rough terrain of our lives and our world into places of beauty and glory. And this hope is not dependent upon human ability or wisdom or power, but on the wisdom and power of God's word.

And that is what we see next in verses six through eight. All flesh is grass and all its beauty like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

people are as fragile and as frail as grass. Here today, gone tomorrow.

[17 : 42] Kingdoms rise and fall, political leaders come and go. Ideas and technology come and go. It's frail.

It's frail. It's momentary. And that is why we can't place our ultimate hope in any person or any of the thousand things that human beings put their hope in, whether it's kings or presidents or historical circumstances or intellect or all beauty.

They're all too frail. They're all too temporary. They're all too momentary. But God's word is eternal. And that is where true hope is to be found.

And if he said it's true, it's going to come true. Isaiah says, the mouth of the Lord has spoken. That was the original mic drop.

Right? The mouth of the Lord has spoken. And when we see what's promised to us here, the transformation of all creation, that's incredible comfort.

[18 : 49] It's going to happen because it's based on God's word. So first of all, we're comforted with a voice of assurance about God's forgiveness.

Second, we are comforted with a voice of hope about God's glory. Thirdly, finally, we see a third voice, that we are comforted with a voice of love.

A voice of love. If we go back to that Jewish dinner table in Babylon one more time and we look outside and we see an unfamiliar place, an unfamiliar culture, unfamiliar food, unfamiliar language, I would imagine, again, spoken or unspoken, that a question that arose around that dinner table was, are we alone?

Has God forgotten us? Has he abandoned us? Has he forsaken us? Look at verse 10 and 11. 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.

[20 : 14] This is the image of God as a warrior shepherd. God promises to come, yes, as a conquering king who reigns and who rewards his people with victory.

But don't miss that the end goal of the reigning conquering king is to dwell with his people in love as a shepherd. This is one of the most intimate images in scripture about God's loving presence with his people.

He gathers them into his arms. And brings them close to his chest. He says to Israel, I haven't forgotten you, I haven't forsaken you, you are not alone.

My whole purpose is to come and to dwell with you in love. And he says the same thing to us. God longs to dwell with us in a loving relationship as a shepherd, to be present with us, to lead us and to guide us, to nourish us, and to bind up our wounds.

And if you're here this morning and you are especially grieving or suffering, look at this image here in Isaiah 40 that the God of Isaiah 40 is not a God who has left you alone, but who gathers you into his arms and who holds you close to his chest.

[22 : 02] There is incredible comfort for us here in this image of our God as a shepherd, warrior, king. And so there's incredible comfort here.

There's comfort all over this passage and in fact, if you read the rest of Isaiah chapter 40, there's more comfort. There's comfort that is extravagant and poured out.

And I wish I had time to preach the rest of the chapter because the entire chapter of Isaiah 40 is glorious. It's one of the most amazing chapters in all of scripture. And so I encourage you later today to go home and read the whole chapter because it is just overflowing with comfort.

But here in these verses we see that we're comforted with a voice of assurance about God's forgiveness, that we're not beyond his mercy. We're comforted with a voice of hope about God's glory, that our story's not over.

And we're comforted with a voice of love about God's presence who comes to dwell with his people, that we are not alone. And centuries later, these words of comfort would leap off the page and take on flesh.

[23 : 30] In Mark chapter 1, our gospel reading, John the Baptist says, that voice in Isaiah chapter 40 calling in the wilderness to prepare, the way for the Lord.

That's me. That is my voice. I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness that God is here. That the God of comfort who was promised and foretold in Isaiah chapter 40 is here.

He has come. Repent and believe the good news. Repent and receive the comfort and the consolation that has taken on flesh.

forgiveness. In Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's ultimate word of assurance to us about God's forgiveness.

It is through his finished work on the cross that we can know with great assurance, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that our sins are forgiven.

[24 : 30] God's ultimate love of a God's ultimate salvation. He is not because of everything in him, because his work was full and final and complete and satisfactory in his death on the cross in our place.

And in Jesus, we find God saying to us, your warfare is ended. your iniquity is pardoned.

You have received from the Lord's hand a double portion, not only the forgiveness of sins, but the transfer of his righteousness to us, our adoption as his sons and daughters, our justification, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and all the spiritual blessings that come in Christ.

He is God's double portion, his overflowing, extravagant grace to us. He is God's word of assurance. to us. And if we put our faith in him, we don't have to doubt for a second that our sins are forgiven and that we belong to God.

Jesus Christ is God's word of hope. He is God's ultimate word of hope to us about the coming of God's glory. In his incarnation, God revealed his glory to the world.

[25 : 48] Wherever Jesus went, valleys were raised up. Mountains were brought low.

Rough places were smoothed. The sick were healed. The blind saw. The lame walked. Sinners repented and received forgiveness.

Wherever Jesus goes, the transformation of the glory of God goes too. God's glory to God's God's glory to the glory of God. And the amazing hope that we have is that we can be united to Jesus' story of cosmic transformation by faith.

Jesus loves to reveal his transforming glory in the wilderness and in the exile of our lives.

And we're gonna hear a story about that later in the service. He can reveal his glory in the rough places of our lives and of our city even now. That is why he came.

[26 : 51] And that's why in Jesus we hear God speaking a word of comfort to us. Your story is not over. God's not done with you. And thirdly, finally, Jesus Christ is God's ultimate word of love to us about God's presence because he is the shepherd king in Isaiah 40 who has come to dwell with his people in love.

And to carry them in his chest. To lead them by the hand. To bind up their wounds. And it's in Jesus that we hear God saying to us, you are not alone.

I am with you. You are loved. Jesus Christ is God's ultimate word of comfort to us. He is our assurance.

He is our hope. And he is the presence of God in love. And the invitation of the season of Advent is that even though we may feel like Israel, that we are waiting in exile.

In a world where we can sometimes feel far from home. In a world of sin. In a world of pain. A world of grief. A world of tears.

[28 : 07] A world of loneliness. A world of waiting. A world where it feels like consolation is never gonna come.

The invitation of the season of Advent is that in that world, in this world, there is incredible comfort to be found because God came.

Behold your God. He came in Jesus Christ and took on flesh. He left all the glory and the comfort of heaven to experience the pain and the difficulty and the grief of exile with us and for us.

He was exiled for us to purchase our eternal comfort. And it's in Jesus Christ that we hear God speaking to us.

And so, I'm so much more in the week. I'm so much more deeply. I'm so much more in that world. Comfort.

[29 : 13] Comfort, my people. I have forgiven you. Your story is not over. You're not alone.

And when we receive this word with open hearts of faith, this comfort can truly become ours. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, bring the comfort and the consolation of your coming into our lives. Reveal your glory.

Lord, comfort us with your incredible assurance. Comfort us with your incredible hope. Comfort us with your incredible love. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.