

"Nothin' but the Hits" PM

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[0 : 00] Let me just pray before I preach. Father, would you open up our hearts to hear your word in Christ's name. Amen. If you came a little bit late, my name is Aaron. I'm the minister for this service. Welcome. I'm going to preach a short sermon now.

Um, leading up to Christmas, we have been looking at readings from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, which was a book of the Bible written about 2,500 years ago.

So let me read to you the Isaiah passage that was assigned for this Sunday. Isaiah 40, 1 to 11.

And the glory of the Lord.

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 its beauty is like the flower of the field.

[1 : 29] The grass withers, the flower fades. When the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.

Lift your voice with strength, O Jerusalem. Herald of good news. Lift it up. Fear not. Says to the cities of Judah, behold your God.

Behold, the Lord God comes with might and his arms 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 and he will gather the lambs in his arms and he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are young.

So there are 66 chapters in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 of those chapters is all about God saying to his people, if you keep doing what you're doing, there's going to be trouble.

Basically, the Hebrew people had stopped trusting God. So God keeps warning them, warning them, warning them. 39 chapters of it, like we would warn children to not touch a hot stovetop.

[2 : 45] But they don't and trouble does come in the form of another country, Assyria, invading them and their world is in ruins just as God had warned. That's the first 39 chapters of Isaiah.

It's pretty bracing stuff. But chapter 40, the one we're looking at today, our chapter, there's a significant change in the message from God. And it's not, I told you so.

It's a word of comfort. It's a word of hope to a people who are broken and grieving. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, come on, mate.

Just, I want you to talk about baby Jesus. It's Christmas. Talk about baby Jesus. Like, why are we looking at this 2,500-year-old bit of writing here at Christmas? Well, for this reason.

This is historically, for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, been a classic pre-Christmas reading. And the reason is this. Because one of the jobs of Old Testament books like Isaiah is to point us to Jesus to help us understand who he is.

[3 : 49] And Isaiah's message to the Hebrew people is actually, and to us, is actually foreshadowing the Christmas story. And you'll see that as we go through it.

Okay, so that was a little bit of a preamble. Let's get into the details of God's message to these people. And God has three things. He has three things to say to his people in chapter 40.

The first thing he says is a word of comfort. Verse 1. Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. And he doesn't just say comfort. He doesn't just say comfort, comfort, comfort, comfort, comfort, comfort.

He actually says comforting things. And the most comforting thing he says is in verse 2. The Israelites have received from the Lord's hand double for all their sins.

They've received double for all their sins. Which doesn't sound very comforting, does it? That doesn't sound like good news. That sounds like a bad thing. It sounds like God is going to punish people twice.

[4 : 51] It's not very comforting. But it's actually saying the opposite. It's just a lost, a bitten translation. You know, this was originally written in the Hebrew language. What it's actually saying is it's God is announcing that what the Hebrew people, their sin, their stuff that they did, which was terrible.

God says, I forgive you for that. I forgive you. And this line received double for their sins. And the original language is a word picture.

It's describing a piece of paper doubled over, folded over exactly at the halfway point. So the bottom half perfectly covers the top half.

Remember, it's a word picture. God's forgiveness completely covers their guilt. It's a lovely image of forgiveness. As you know, one of the great disturbers of peace and comfort is regret and guilt and shame and reliving stupid things that you've done.

And I wonder, I'm sure, probably many of us here are still wearing a little bit of guilt from things perhaps done many years ago. I want you to think about that word picture.

[6 : 05] Remember what it was. It's like a piece of paper, like this. And you can imagine the bottom half here represents the thing robbing you of peace.

Something that shames you. And what God says is double, double. Doubles it over like that. Completely covering it.

Sin is gone. God's forgiveness is absolute. That's what God spoke in comfort to his people. And it's what he speaks to us.

This is what God can do for you. Take away shame. Take away guilt. It's not something we can do for ourselves, no matter how hard we try. So this is the picture God told Isaiah to share with his people.

So that's the first word that God says to his people who are sort of in captivity, who were captured in Isaiah 40. He says, look, I know you did some stupid stuff. You did terrible things. I forgive you.

[7 : 05] I forgive you. Completely forgive you. Now how does that point us to Christmas? What's that got to do with Christmas? You know, the astonishing fact of Christmas is that God became a human.

But why? Why become a human? It's a great question, right? Why not just turn up as a spirit? Why not 2,000 years ago, did God not just become like this disembodied voice saying cool stuff to people?

Like just everywhere. Like cool stuff, right? Jesus said cool stuff. Why not just say Jesus stuff? Just, you know, mysteriously from out of nowhere.

That would be memorable. Why did God take on humanness? Take on our humanness? Take on bones? Blood? A beating heart?

Well, God became a person. A vulnerable child. A fleshy, mortal person. So that he could be hurt. So that he could be killed.

[8 : 14] So he could die. God became something that could be killed. Why? For forgiveness. Because he died for us.

God's big desire was forgiveness. That's how this points to the Christmas story. So let's keep going. So that's the first announcement. Forgiveness. The second announcement is about the majesty of God.

Verses 3 to 5. It's up behind me, I believe. If you look at the start of it, all that make paths straight stuff, prepare the way.

It's describing a huge construction project. It's talking about a royal visit. And as you know, it's kind of like when we lay out the red carpet for important people.

It's the ancient extreme version of that. So back in the days, a king or a queen would come to visit some random town way back in the days. They wouldn't travel on the usual sort of goat trail that normal people would.

[9 : 20] No, they would get a brand new road built for them. Flat, straight road. It says something about how important that person is. But it also says something to the people receiving the royal visit.

When Queen Elizabeth II died a little while ago, I remember reading about her and one commentator made that no matter where she went, it always smelled like fresh paint. So Isaiah here, he tells his people, clear the road.

Clear the road. There's a royal visit coming. Clear the road. Again, this is a word picture. It's trying to convey something important.

He's saying, remove the rubble between you and God.

Make the paths clear. Deal with the things between you and your creator. Things like pride. Things which say, I don't need God.

[10 : 19] I've got my life kind of covered, thanks. Where do we need to clear things out of the way? What rocks or stones are in place need to be gone for you to make God a meaningful part of your life?

Now remember, this is pointing to a bigger story. It's pointing to something else. It's pointing us to Jesus. 2,000 years ago, God made a royal visit.

He was born into this world. Later in our service, one of the readings is the story about the wise men who bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And we're so familiar with the story, we don't realize that, gee, those are really odd gifts, aren't they?

Like, why not bring like a casserole? Why not bring something sensible? Except if you knew that back in the days, what was the kind of gifts you would bring to a king?

You would bring these kind of gifts. So clear the way, Isaiah says. What rubble do you need to clear out of the way in your heart to accept that this baby, on the Christmas cards, is God?

[11 : 28] Is the king of the universe? Isaiah follows it up with his announcement of the royal visit with a very honest look at what it looks like to be human as opposed to God.

Here's what Isaiah says about humanity, verses 6 to 8. So what's that all about?

It's saying, no matter how great we are physically or mentally right now, it's all going to go. It all fades. This will surprise you, but I was once good looking.

Oh, mate, it's very kind. It was in my early 30s. It was in my early 30s. It lasted about three months. I remember it.

It was a great couple of months. But these things fade, don't they? It all fades. It all fades. Now, God doesn't say this stuff to mock the fact that we're such fragile, fleshy things.

[12 : 40] He does it so that our identity and our hope and our comfort is grounded in something eternal, something lasting. So like beauty and fitness and insolent, these are all fantastic, but they all go downhill.

So none of these things can bear the weight of our hopes. And God reminds us of that. So he says, here is what God is like, and here is your fragility compared to it.

Again, not to mock us, but so that we would put our hope in him and not our own fading intellect or looks.

Okay, summary so far. A really quick summary, and then we're almost finished. God has several things to say to comfort us. The first is, it's a big one, you're forgiven.

The second is God is coming to visit. So clear the rubble. Clear the stuff out of the way so that you can receive him.

[13 : 46] It could be pride. It could be trusting in your own success. Clear the path. Now, thirdly, and very quickly, the third point of the passage is this. This king who is coming, let me tell you about him.

This is what Isaiah says. Verse 9, behold your God. It's a great line, isn't it? Behold your God. But what are we beholding? We have these preconceived ideas about God, perhaps, but what does God say about himself here?

Verses 10 and 11, it tells us, Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arms 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, and he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are young. Do you see this description of the king here who will make all things right when he returns?

He's not messing around. He's got his big old, he's got his guns, he's got his arms. This is like strength in action. God's going to roll up his sleeves. He's going to get stuff done. But in case it sounds like he's just some fierce military-style leader, remember verse 11, And he will tend his flock like a shepherd, who will gather the lambs in his arms, and he will carry them in his bosom and gently lead those that are young.

[14 : 59] This mighty king is also a shepherd. This God, this king of the universe, is a shepherd, and he will gather you up like a shepherd gathers up a vulnerable lamb, and he will gather up and he will hold on to you.

And I just think being in the arms of the shepherd king of the universe sounds like about the safest and most comforting thing I can imagine. Now some of you may already know this, but it's no coincidence that Jesus, as an adult, describes himself as the good shepherd in the New Testament.

So that we would understand all these things written two and a half thousand years ago are pointing to him. So let me finish up here. These are astonishing things we've talked about.

And I hope they break through the noise of Christmas. Stress about family, gifts, get the house nice and clean, all that sort of stuff. I hope they break through the noise of Christmas.

I have a think for just 30 more seconds here about comfort. The comfort that God offered to these folks 2,500 years ago. He says, you're forgiven.

[16 : 08] Isn't that brilliant? And I've given you something to hope in that will outlast everything else in your life. You can count on that.

Isn't that wonderful? Perhaps you've heard about the five languages of love. I really like words of encouragement, if you're familiar with these things. People saying to me, Aaron, you got this.

Like, I love that stuff. I find that comforting, but just for a time. The comfort that God offers, the hope he offers, is so much deeper, though, isn't it, than the words we just say to each other.

And they're deeper because it's God speaking and not just a good friend. It's God speaking and not just a comforting pep talk from a good mate of ours.

It's the creator speaking. And if that's true, we can build a life on what he says. We can trust it. So we have these words written and spoken 2,500 years ago.

[17:10] And God really did rescue his people back then. I remind you again that that rescue was just a dress rehearsal for the much greater rescue that came with Christ.

Christ, God in his strength, but in vulnerability, came as a child, Jesus to offer us comfort and hope and forgiveness. And there is nothing else that can come close to that.

Now, if you are new to these kind of conversations, what do you do with all that? Perhaps you're thinking, it would be good to sort of clear a little bit of the rubble out of the way, because I've got some issues, I've got some problems with what you're saying.

I understand that. If you'd like to hear more, to think about this stuff more, clear some rubble perhaps, if this sounds great, stay in touch with our church.

Come and have a chat to me. Early in the new year, we're going to be running some discussion groups called Come and See. And you can bring all your questions and all your thoughts to that.

[18:13] And we create a space where we can have a good chat about this kind of thing. Okay. I'm going to pray now, and then we're going to get on with some more carols. So let me pray.

You don't have to move at all, but let me pray. Heavenly Father, would you give us a hope, an eternal hope, that only you can provide this Christmas.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.