

The Voice

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen.

Well, good evening, everyone. I've already met a couple of new people this evening. If you are new, welcome. Fantastic to have you here. My name's Aaron. This is Jordan.

I'd love to meet you if you're new. So afterwards, would you just tap me on the shoulder and just tell me your name? I'd love to shake your hand and say hi. This is the fourth time I've preached today.

You'll be happy to know it gets better every time. So we're in the sweet spot right now. As Jordan mentioned, this is the first Sunday of Advent. And Advent, if you're kind of new to the church calendar stuff, Advent is not the countdown to Christmas.

It's a time of preparation. We prepare to celebrate God coming as a baby in Jesus Christ. And also we anticipate Christ's return.

[1 : 05] In order to prepare ourselves well in this Advent season, we're taking a break from 2 Corinthians. And we have a short series, four weeks, because Advent is four Sundays. And it's called The Gospel According to Isaiah.

So we're looking at some Christmas themes through the book of Isaiah. Now, if you're not familiar with Isaiah, the simplest way I could sort of break it up is two halves, basically.

It's an Old Testament book, two halves. Chapters 1 to 39 and 40 to 66. 1 to 39. The focus is on judgment. God is talking about a judgment to come.

God tells Isaiah to tell the Hebrew people that they're going to be taken into captivity. 39 chapters of that. And the prediction, of course, comes true. As we know, the Babylonians sweep through Jerusalem, destroy the temple, remove anyone that's sort of of any importance.

And the Hebrew people are very broken by this. And so Isaiah predicts this for 39 chapters. But then we sort of turn a page in our Bibles in chapter 40. It's like God is announcing something new.

[2 : 12] And the focus for the second half is very different. And we get what's introduced in chapter 1 of verse 40. Comfort. Comfort my people.

God is telling Isaiah to comfort his people. Now, what does that comfort look like? Well, the rest of our passage explains that. But we will see, I think, I hope, that you'll see that the comfort that God offers is very different to human comfort.

What do I mean by human comfort? What does that look like? Well, human comfort often looks like, as a comparison, often looks like nice feelings that come from nice words.

Let me give you some phrases that you may have heard before. The sun will come up tomorrow. You are stronger than you know. I have faith in you.

I know you can get through this. There are plenty more fish in the sea. So that's a good one, right? That's a crack out, that one. You've heard that one? Yeah. So they're sort of, I'm not trying to demean them, but they're kind of pep talks, right?

[3 : 29] They're morale boosters. Now, the problem with human comfort is it is us focused. And it's comfort from within. It's our dreams. It's our hopes. It's us fantasizing about a better tomorrow, a future that we dream up.

So we dream up some consolations. It doesn't really change much, though. I think they can be very helpful, but they can keep us going for a little bit.

But human comfort is often, it's just a product of our own efforts. Now, don't get me wrong. Comforting words are not bad, and we should be encouraging to each other.

They can be very helpful, but they only work. Human words, just about us, only work to a point. They only help to a point. I'll give you an example.

It's a silly example, but it's the best one I can think of in my life. I was a very shy teenager. And you know that your teen years can be very painful.

[4 : 35] It's like for me, in my life, at the point where I started to become interested in girls, my body said, right, I'm going to make you look terrible. Like I'm 13, you know, 14.

I'm going to do everything I can to reduce any opportunity for you to enact on your desires. So your skin gets a bit rough, and you go through that phase where your feet and your nose and your ears are all out of proportion to the rest of your body, and so you just look pretty awkward.

So I'm 13, and I'm pretty, sort of quite pasty and skinny, and unlike I am now, which is pretty buff and golden.

Anyway, so I obviously looked fairly miserable. And out of the blue, I'll never forget this, out of the blue, my mum said to me one day, she goes, Aaron, you have really nice lips.

Girls are going to like kissing those lips one day. It sounds creepy when I say it, I know.

[5 : 56] And it did take probably a solid decade before there was any empirical evidence of this. But they were very comforting words at the time. They were nice words.

But our encouraging words to each other can only go so deep. See, there's two problems with our comforting words, the human comforting words. One, two, we are weak to change it.

But the comfort that God offers goes so much deeper. Now, I'm not saying don't encourage each other, but it's just that the comfort that God offers goes so much deeper.

And that's because real comfort is not a product of human endeavor. It's a God project. And frankly, I feel like the world's a real mess right now.

It feels such a mess. And what we need less of, or what we don't need any more of, is more stories about the courageous human spirit. What we need more of is the truth about who God is.

[7 : 09] So let's get to the meat of the passage now. So God tells Isaiah, comfort my people. Not with human comfort. Not with nice things to say to them.

He gives them three things to say. Three announcements, which are in the rest of the passage. But I'll give you a heads up of what they are. One, God lays claim to you by coming.

By coming into the world. Two, God lays claim to you by coming with might and kindness. And three, God lays claim to you by his forgiveness. So let's go through all of these.

These are three things to give us lasting comfort. The first announcement, God lays claim to you just by coming. This is verses three and four and five. I've already just reminded you of a couple of those verses.

A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley should be lifted up and every mountain and hill made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places are plain.

[8 : 12] Isn't it interesting here, I think? It's very interesting. That to the people in exile, to people in trouble, to people who are broken, God doesn't say, I feel your pain. He tells them of his majesty.

He tells them something about himself. Where do I get that from in the passage? All this make paths straight stuff, prepare away, it's talking about a royal visit.

When we have royalty visit, most nations in the world, the modern day equivalent of what it's talking about here is rolling out the red carpet, right? You know, that special kind of carpet that you walk down. This is the ancient extreme version of that.

If royalty is visiting, somebody really important is visiting, they get their own road. They build a road for them. They pull down mountains. They make rough places.

They get their own road. It's a brand new road. It's flattened. It's straightened. It says something about how important this person is and that they will arrive without fail. And those who experience that arrival will experience the glory of this person, the majesty of this person.

[9 : 21] Now, the Hebrew people that Isaiah spoke to here got to experience this in a partial way. But, of course, it's only fully realized in the coming of Jesus. This Christmas, you will see, you'll read the stories of Jesus in a manger and you'll see sort of actual babies in mangers and stuff.

When you do that, knowing who this is or who this represents, knowing what this child has come to do, what should we be thinking? We should be thinking this.

We should be thinking, the Lord has made his way to us. And that should fill us with godly fear and awe. And that translates to comfort.

And why do I say that translates to comfort? Because it's... The comfort of Christmas is so great because it demonstrates that God does hold the future and that he does fulfill his promises.

Because he holds the future in his hand and he's the only one that can bring it about and bring change. The more we understand that, the more we'll experience the comfort of God and the more we reject other sources of hope that give us hope and comfort that's only about this deep.

[10 : 46] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was the German theologian and martyr, he died in a concentration camp. He wrote a lot about Advent. He loved Advent. And he wrote about the importance of understanding again who Jesus really is in the midst of Christmas sentimentalism.

Let me read a short quote from him from which we actually got the titles of our sections here. He says this, So we're coming up to Christmas.

Advent prepares us for that. And without that preparation, what have we got? We have a reductionist version of Christmas which is about eggnog and gifts and meals and festive sweaters and cute baby Jesus.

And when you do that, when you sanitize Jesus, you will get as much comfort this year from Jesus as you would a Hallmark card.

No, Isaiah reminds us, the Lord has come. This is the Lord that has come.

[12 : 10] And Jesus is that coming King, prophesied by Isaiah. And he has come to make things right. And that is deep comfort. Comfort that won't come from us thinking up nice thoughts about our future which we don't have any control over, or much control over.

No, it comes through the knowledge that Jesus is Lord. That is our hope. That is our comfort. And to really drive this point home, Isaiah, he has a very sort of honest look at the comparative glory of humanity.

This is verses sort of 6 to 8. You can see there, he talks about us as he goes, all flesh is grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fade.

In a sense, Isaiah is saying, guys, you've kind of got to get over yourself a little bit. You really have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow to you. And you have far less control over it than you think.

And so you're not going to have lasting hope by digging deep into yourself. But you will as you experience the majesty and glory and authority of Jesus.

[13 : 29] Okay, moving on. More quickly now. So Isaiah has been given the job of comforting God's people.

And the first announcement is God lays claim to you by coming. By coming as the king. The second announcement is this. God lays claim to you by coming with might and kindness.

Look at verses 10 to 11 there. Behold, the Lord comes with might and his arm rules for him. It's a great line. 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. Do you see the description of the coming king here who will make things right? He comes with might. It says that his arms rules for him.

That means like it's a strength in action. The king is coming but he's rolling up his sleeves. He's going to get on with the job. He comes with reward and recompense. He will be judged. There will be judgment.

[14 : 25] But he's not just a fierce military style leader as one commentator writes this. The king comes with rule and power and ruin with truth and justice and yet also is a shepherd.

He will tend his flock. And gather the lambs in his arms. This mighty king who brings mountains low whose glory is eternal who gets his own road who wants to gather you up like a shepherd gathers up a vulnerable lamb.

Now I don't know what you think of that picture. Whether you've thought about that before or whether perhaps you think it's a bit cheesy or but it was a picture it was an image very carefully chosen by God.

God and as I've sort of thought about it today being in the arms of the shepherd king that sounds like the safest and most comforting place in the world to me.

That's the second announcement. So the first one was that God lays claim to you by coming and the second God lays claim to you by coming with kindness and with might.

[15 : 38] And the third one God lays claim to you through his forgiveness. Look at verses one and two there. This is how our passage starts. 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.

So God here makes an announcement that Israel's sin has been pardoned. This line very interesting way of explaining it. She has received at the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

What does that mean? It's a Hebrew word picture. And the picture is this. It's of a piece of paper folded exactly over at the halfway point so that the bottom half is perfectly and completely covered by the top half.

Do you see that? This is the picture of forgiveness that God tells Isaiah to tell his people. As you know, you don't need me to tell this.

[16 : 43] One of the great disturbers of our hope and our comfort is regret and guilt. You know this, right? And I wonder if some of you here are still bearing guilt.

Perhaps from things done many years ago that seem to have a hook in your heart that you kind of drag around with you.

Perhaps you could just picture something for a moment. A piece of paper like this. Here it is. And on the left hand side is your sin.

Now imagine that piece of paper being folded over perfectly like that. So now your sin is completely covered.

Now I'm not, this is not some made up, I'm just telling you what the Bible is saying here. This is the picture it's giving you. What does that mean? That your sin is perfectly covered.

[17 : 55] It is gone. That God no longer holds it against you. That's the picture God told Isaiah to share with his people. Because there is no real hope and there's no peace and there's no deep comfort unless we're right with God.

There is no forgiveness without the shepherd. And God announces it here. You're reconciled with God. And it's his work. He has done it. You can try to forgive yourself and perhaps people have told you to do that.

But it's one of those human comforting things. It kind of works maybe a little bit but not really. Forgiveness must come from the outside and of course this is why Jesus died.

If you're here and you're not a Christian this is the heart of the good news about Jesus. In the midst of our fear and anxiety and our mess the father sent his son down.

He gave up his life for us to pay the price for our sin to forgive us because we can't forgive ourselves. Isn't that astonishing? That the king who has made his way to us makes his way all the way to the cross and dies for us.

[19 : 16] Let me finish up here. Folks, this is the first week of Advent and here's what I really hope. I hope that you would dive in to the kind of comfort that Isaiah talks about here.

Comfort that is not a human project but something that God speaks and we trust in because more important than our words about ourselves to ourselves or our words to somebody else more important than those are God's words about himself and here are those words.

There are three announcements. There is a God. You're not him. Hope in him.

God lays claim to you because he's come. Second, God lays claim to you because he has come with kindness but also with might and God lays claim to you because he forgives you and that forgiveness is complete.

These are the truths that God told Isaiah to tell his people. This is what comfort looks like, folks. Amen.