



Isaiah 40.¹⁻¹¹

Comfort ye my people

Introduction

This Christmas season, we take up a text already beautify as penned by Isaiah, and further beautified by the skilled work of the composer, Handel. These words not only begin Handel's Messiah, but begin a new focus of the great Hebrew Prophet. I have often referred to Isaiah 40, along with those chapters that immediately follow, as "The Book of Comfort." The opening words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," are most appropriate to this Christmas season. They are what Jesus' birth, earthly ministry, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and current, ongoing ministry are all about.

Isaiah's words brought comfort to sixth century B.C. Jews living in exile. Surely, this was their original context and principle focus. But, later, these same words brought comfort and meaning to first century Christians who enjoyed the appearance of the long-awaited Messiah. They might very well yet bring comfort to a future generation of Jews awaiting Messiah, and Christians awaiting Messiah's return.

We are appreciative of God's ability to comfort his people in whatever time and circumstances they may find themselves. But, we are most interested in likening the words of Isaiah to ourselves¹ in order to find comfort in our own *present* time and circumstances.

In our passage, we hear four voices. Each voice speaks a word of comfort. We will want to

¹ See 1 Nephi 19:23

look at each of these voices in turn to discover the comfort promised to every individual who hears and trusts the comforting messages.

first voice

“Comfort ye,
 comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem,
 and cry unto her,
that her warfare is accomplished,
 that her iniquity is pardoned:
for she hath received of the LORD’s hand
 double for all her sins.”²

The first voice announces the pardoning of sin and release from the uncertainties, contradictions, hostilities, and dangers that accompany sin. Just as ancient Israel’s sins caused Israel to live, first, under the threat of attack and defeat at the hands of her enemies, and later under the bondage of exile, we often live under a sense of God’s displeasure, “hostility,” and even abandonment. Now, we do not think for a moment that God actually hates and attacks us. We believe, in theory anyway, that he “loves us.” Yet, we often feel withdrawn from that love. We certainly interpret this sort of divine “neglect”—whether real or imagined—as “hostile.” It creates real insecurity. It threatens our sense of self. It is akin to death.

So, a voice that puts an end to such feelings is most welcome. A voice that declares, “Thy sins are forgiven;” a voice that reveals a God at peace, at-one with us, rather than hostile to us is surely one of the most comforting of all voices. This is the voice that each can hear, not only during this Christmas season, but every one of the remaining 364 days a year. It is the voice first heard announced by a chorus of angels and then confirmed in every moment of Jesus’ ministerial revelation of God’s goodwill to all men.

² Verses 1-2

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, *good will toward men.*”³

Second voice

“The voice of him that crieth
in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the LORD,⁴
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be exalted,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low:
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough places plain:
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together:
for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”⁵

Again, we demand a more than one-time fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. There is more going on here than can be taken in by John the Baptist’s long-ago preparations. These are words spoken to every generation, including, of course, our own.

If we find the hope promised by the first voice almost more than we can fathom, we are astounded by the next voice. For God does not wait for us to come to our senses and turn to him. He doesn’t wait for us to get our lives straight, before he hesitantly approaches to be sure we are worthy. Oh, no. He works in the wildernesses, in the desert places of our souls. It is, as Paul would later declare in triplicate:

³ Luke 2.¹⁴

⁴ Traditionally, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness.” But the structure of Hebrew poetry with its parallelism, seems clear: it is not a voice that is in the wilderness, but a highway. “Wilderness” is parallel with “desert.” “Way” is parallel with “highway.” “Prepare” is parallel with “make.” “The LORD” is parallel with “our God.

⁵ Verses 3-5

“For *when we were yet without strength*, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.”⁶

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us.”⁷

“For if, *when we were enemies*, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.”⁸

God labors in those places that are too high for us, over which we cannot climb. He labors in those places that are too fearfully low and dark, through which we cannot walk. And finding them, he smooths and levels a path *so that he may come to us!* We are his desired destination, not him ours. We talk of serving him. *He* talks of our needed service to him. But at during this Christmas season we are reminded again, that of all the service rendered, it is HIS service to us that is most powerful. It is HIS service to us that shows us the way to service—service to him and service to those around us, so loved by him.

Third voice

“The voice said, ‘Cry.’

And he said, ‘What shall I cry?’

‘All flesh is grass,

and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field:

The grass withereth,

the flower fadeth:

because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it:

surely the people is grass.

The grass withereth,

the flower fadeth:

but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”

⁶ Romans 5.⁶

⁷ Romans 5.⁸

⁸ Romans 5.¹⁰

At first glance, these verses may seem somewhat negative and pessimistic; at odds with the hope and optimism that we have identified so far. But upon closer examination, we find the same message of surprising hope that we have found everywhere else.

To whom are the words of comfort, spoken by the first voice, offered? *For* whom will the Lord labor, as promised by the second voice? Again, not for the “worthy” and “spiritually capable.” The Lord’s comforting words and intense labor is for those whose “goodliness” is transitory and inconsistent and weak, nigh unto death.

The Lord’s forgiveness is not based upon our “worthiness” to receive the blessing of forgiveness. Such a thought would simply be nonsensical! Our peace with him and his peace with us is not based upon our having earned it through personal effort. His willingness to dirty and endanger himself by laboring in the humiliating wildernesses and deserts of our lives is not a reflection of our goodness. What small amounts of “worthiness,” “efforts,” and “goodness” are inadequate and short-lived.

But his promises stand forever. The comfort of the Lord’s forgiveness, peace, and personal presence and labor in our lives is due to his worthiness, his efforts, and his goodness. His willingness and ability to be a participating part of our lives is not limited to our capacities or by our incapacities.

“Let them praise the name of the LORD:
for *his name alone is excellent*;
his glory is above the earth and heaven.⁹

fourth voice

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings,
get thee up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings,
lift up thy voice with strength;

⁹ Psalm 148.¹³

lift it up, be not afraid;
say unto the cities of Judah,
Behold your God!
Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand,
and his arm shall rule for him:
behold, his reward is with him,
and his work before him.
He shall feed his flock like a shepherd:
he shall gather the lambs with his arm,
and carry them in his bosom,
and shall gently lead those that are with young.”¹⁰

Look! Your God! See! Your God is coming! Oh, what good tidings indeed this is. It is part of Isaiah’s message of comfort—this entrance of the Lord, not only into the life of ancient Israel, but into every life, everywhere, every when.

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come,
and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.”¹¹

Whose face would not glow, as a child’s in the arrival of a long-absent parent, with the joy of the Lord’s arrival? Who would not, as a child rushing into the arms of a long-absent parent, rush into the arms of God upon his arrival? The arms of God. How reassuringly strong they are! They were strong enough to win the unwinnable war; strong enough to do the heavy work required to tame the wilderness and turn it into a path of salvation. Yet, at the same time, the arms of God are the arms of a shepherd, tender enough to see, without contempt, the weakness of the child, and forgive the weakness; tender enough to observe the vulnerability of the lamb, and take it into loving embrace.

It is easy to imagine how this entire passage might have served as inspiration for one of the Savior’s most cherished and encouraging parables.

¹⁰ Verses 9-11

¹¹ Isaiah 60.¹

“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, ‘Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.’”¹²

May we each, this Christmas season, trust in the Lord’s willingness to do the heavy work it takes to enter intimately into our messy, muddy, and muddled life. May we believe that he will do so with forgiveness and power and tenderness. With this trust and belief, may we invite him to enter, make room for him in our inn. He would be so very pleased to enter.

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”¹³

And may we, in turn, not only invite others to partake of his goodness—a great service in itself—but may we follow his example, and willingly, happily, and without judgment enter into the messy, muddy, and muddled life of others. May we speak and act comfortably toward them. May we follow the greatest of our Lord’s admonitions,

“Love one another; as I have loved you.”¹⁴

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹² Luke 15.⁴⁻⁶

¹³ Revelation 3.²⁰

¹⁴ John 13.³⁴