

"Comfort, Not A Curse"

Isaiah 40:1-11

December 7, 2014

2nd Sunday in Advent

Judgment is an important part of the Advent season, but not a particularly popular part.

Judgment just doesn't seem to fit in well with our "cute baby in the manger" scenario of Advent. Plus, to speak of judgment is to violate the chief rule of our culture today: don't be judgmental. "Don't judge me!" is the rallying cry of many people in our world today.

As Christians, we don't feel that way....or do we? While we would grant the notion that God has the authority and right to judge and that He will eventually do it (as we confess in our creeds every week), we probably think that it doesn't apply to us. God will judge the heathen, the unbelievers, and the really bad people, but us? We are God's people. Surely He won't judge us! Our text for today from Isaiah is the story of the aftermath of God judging His own people. And if He did it before, He can certainly do it again.

To understand how this came to be, we have to go back to Egypt. The people of Israel were a sinful people. There was nothing inherently special or good about them. They were slaves there under Pharaoh and doomed to a slow and painful death.

God, in His mercy, chose them to be His people. He intervened in human history to free them from slavery and led them out of Pharaoh's control. He made a covenant with them at Sinai in which He promised to be their God and they would be His people. He then led them to a Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Yet God's people – those whom He had chosen and saved – rebelled against Him. They disobeyed His holy Law. In their worship, they did the least they possibly could to fulfill the bare letter of the law, and not its spirit or intent. While they worshiped the Lord (at least with their lips), they also adopted the idols of the neighboring nations with all their sinful practices.

And do you know why they did this? Because they thought they could. After all, they were the people of God. They had the Temple. They had the Holy City, Jerusalem. They had the Promised Land of Israel. God would NEVER do anything to them, they thought, so they did as they pleased.

Well, they thought wrong. God's judgment upon them was swift and severe. Around 587 BC. God sent King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to execute His judgment against His own people. Nebuchadnezzar and his forces burned the Temple, burned Jerusalem, and relocated the people of God to Babylon.

There they stayed for 70 years. The Lord could have left them there in Babylon to rot forever and, because Israel had been SO sinful and SO rebellious SO often, no one would have blamed them. Yet God shows mercy as we see in our text. He brings a message of hope. He says, "Comfort, comfort my people." "Comfort" here does not mean to simply "feel good". It means "encouragement". Rather than curse His people as they deserved. He was coming to encourage them.

What would encourage a group of suffering and disillusioned exiles in Babylon? The Lord goes on, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." This is the language of love – romantic love, even. This is the Lord, the lover, seeking to convince Israel, His beloved, that He still loved them, despite all they had been through.

What would He speak to His beloved to convince 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." Israel's war with the Lord and her slavery in Babylon were now over. All of her iniquities (and they were many) were now being pardoned. She would not merely be comforted and encouraged but she would receive a double portion of God's grace for all her sins.

The Lord would Himself intervene into Israel's situation to bring her back to the land. A highway would be built in the desert to take them back. Everything that was in the way would be

removed. The Lord, through men such as Nehemiah and Ezra, would lead the people home to repossess the land, rebuild the city, and re-establish the Temple.

None of this was due to Israel's repentance, strong faith, or moral effort. The prophet says that all people are weak – like grass or the flowers of the field – and will eventually fade away. But, he says, "The word of our God will stand forever." It is God who accomplishes everything by His Word. By His mighty arm and by His gentle mercy as a shepherd, He did all of this for Israel.

Our lives as the New Testament people of God parallels the lives of the Old Testament people of God. Like ancient Israel, we are a sinful people. There is nothing inherently special or good about us. We were slaves to sin under Satan and doomed to a slow, painful and eternal death in hell.

Yet, incredibly, God, in His mercy chose us to be His people. He intervened in human history in an event we will celebrate in less than three weeks. God entered creation and became a little child to rescue us. Jesus, true God and true man, fulfilled the obedience to the Law which was required of us. He did our duty and gave us the credit for it. Jesus took our sin upon Himself on the cross and suffered His Father's wrath and punishment for us. He died the death we deserved and we go free. Jesus arose from death to life, from the grave to the ultimate Promised Land that He might raise us from our graves to life and lead us there.

Yet, incredibly, like the people of Israel, we, whom God has chosen, loved, and saved continue to rebel against Him. We blatantly break His Law, seemingly without caring. Surveys show that the morality and lifestyles of many professing Christians are essentially no different than unbelievers. In matters of priorities, sexual behavior, money, and so on, Christians often act just like unbelievers.

We adopt the idols of the surrounding culture. We may not worship statues of wood and stone, but we worship at the altars of sports, electronics, pleasure, sex, and many other modern day idols. The sad thing is that many people have been so duped by the culture that they don't even know they have become like unbelievers and idolaters.

Do you know why we do this? Like Israel, we think we can do whatever we want and get away with it. We have been confirmed and are members in good standing of a church. We have a church building. We sit through the worship service, some less often than others. Surely, we think, “God will never do anything to us. After all, we are His people. He loves us just the way we are.”

Let’s learn a lesson from the folly of Israel who thought the same thing. Could God judge Christians today as severely as He did Israel in Old Testament times? I’m sure He could. Is there a military and political power in the Mideast, like Nebuchadnezzar, that could inflict pain and punishment upon Christians and Christianity? I’m sure there is. Thanks be to God that nothing has happened to God’s rebellious people today – yet. But, at the very least, sin still separates us spiritually, if not physically from our God. And, if that doesn’t change, we will be exiles in a place for us far worse than Babylon.

Yet, despite our sin and our sometimes apathetic attitude to sin, God does not act toward us as our sins deserve. He treats us better than we deserve. He is still merciful to us as He was to ancient Israel. “Comfort, comfort my people says YOUR God.” Many are not here to hear God’s judgment and they continue on in their present state at their own risk. However, to you who are here, weary of warring with God and sick from sin, God wishes to encourage you.

He speaks tenderly to us, as a lover would speak to His beloved, to tell us that He still loves us despite all the wrong that we have done, despite all the good we have failed to do. He assures us that our warfare against Him, initiated and carried out solely by us, is over. We didn’t end it. We couldn’t end it. We are weak and withering like grass, fading like the flower of the field. The warfare was ended by Christ on the cross who, when shouting, “It is finished!”, ended our warfare with Him, our slavery to sin, our control by Satan, our doom in hell. He tells us that our iniquity has been pardoned and that we have received double encouragement, double pardon, double mercy for all of our sins.

But there's more. The Lord is coming to intervene in human history again. Although, this time, it is not as a beautiful baby, but as mighty judge. A road in this earthly desert will be constructed. Everything evil and sinful that has been done, whether by heathen unbelievers or professing believers will be condemned by the Judge and gotten rid of. For those who have rejected God, taken advantage of God, or taken God's mercy for granted and remained in their sin, it will be a frightening and (no doubt) surprising time of judgment and punishment with hell waiting

But, for those who are equally weak like grass and flowers, but have been moved by the Word of God to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, this will be a glorious time of vindication and reward. The Lord is coming to gather His people like lambs and to tend them like a shepherd. He will give them the reward earned by their Savior – a declaration of “not guilty” for all their sins – and the fulfillment of the new life, given in baptism, free from sin, guilt, pain, suffering, ending or loss which has been waiting in heaven for them.

We have been so blessed by God in not yet experiencing a judgment like the people of Israel did back in the 6th century BC. But don't let that fool you or lull you into a false sense of security. Let the present people of God learn from the ancient people of God. Take your sin seriously. God certainly does...and will.

But, even more important, take God's comfort seriously. In taking sin seriously, don't be afraid. Your war with God is over. You have been pardoned of all your iniquities. Let the Word of God lead you to repentance to realize that sin and faith to receive God's forgiveness for that sin. To do that means being where the Word of God is heard – in Divine Service, as well as in your homes. Make frequent use of the means by which God conveys a double portion of His mercy, forgiveness, and encouragement through the assurance of your Baptism, the comfort of the Word of God, and the reassurance of the Lord's Supper.

Our church is alive with decoration, thanks to many adults and children who helped do this yesterday. This shows our excitement and eagerness over Jesus coming as a baby at Christmas.

And that's a good thing. While I wouldn't advocate the hanging of gavels and pictures of judges (as used in the children's sermon today), I think we can be just as excited and eager over Jesus coming as Judge on the Last Day. What Jesus came to earn the 1st time by His life, death, and resurrection – namely, freedom from sin and guilt, destruction of Satan and evil, and a life of eternal joy and peace in His direct presence, He comes a 2nd time to give to His faithful people. Therefore, let us live lives of repentance over sin, faith in God's encouragement and pardon, and trust in His comforting promises. If you think Christmas is wonderful, just wait. The best is yet to come. Amen.