

## *Sermon Outline*

*Introduction:* Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation today is the Old Testament Lesson of Isaiah chapter forty, verses one through eleven.

Boys and girls, I pray that you are doing well today. What do you do when you get hurt? When you skin your knee, bust your lip, or get a paper cut? You run to mom or dad and ask for hugs, pick me ups. Because you are in pain and you want comfort. Similarly, we need a great comfort. We need the comfort of God over our grievous sins. How does God comfort us? Ponder that question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

“Comfort, comfort, ye My people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God” (*TLH* 61:1). I love that hymn! Some people think it’s a little slow. I think the tune so perfectly sets a mood of peace, serenity, quiet, which I really need at a busy time of year. It’s like a voice that gently lulls away anxiety: “Comfort, comfort, ye My people.” I think that hymn is the reason I love our text so much.

The prophet’s voice is supposed to open a new, comforting section of the whole Book of Isaiah. Chs 1–39 are primarily judgment, ending with a prophecy of the Babylonian captivity. Then chs 40–66 are to be primarily a message of comfort. It begins well enough: “ ‘Comfort, yes, comfort My people!’ Says your God. ‘Speak comfort to Jerusalem’ ” (NKJV). But then the prophet’s voice changes altogether.

### WHERE’S THE COMFORT IN THAT VOICE?

It’s as if . . . A voice cries out that anything standing in God’s way will be bulldozed.

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken’ ” (vv 3–5 NKJV and throughout the outline).

Every valley and mountain shall be leveled. “Get that earthmover in here! Get that blasting crew! We need some dynamite here! Hurry up with those dozers!” That’s the voice we hear from Isaiah. The text is a Hard-Hat Only area; vast tracts of land are being leveled. A highway’s going through. It’s not going around

the mountains. It's not going through the valleys. There aren't going to be any more mountains or valleys. See, this highway is the Messiah coming, God on his way. He doesn't reroute for anybody. Nothing can stand in his way—not solid granite peaks, not deep, steep ravines. If you're in the way, you're getting bulldozed.

This, of course, is why seven hundred years later John the Baptist came crying out “Repent!” John wasn't concerned about mountains being run over. He came to see that people did not get flattened. Lives that are not level, that are crooked, that are not perfectly in line with the rule of God's Law will be blasted away. When the heavy machinery comes rolling through, anyone with sin will not be an innocent victim. We all get excited about Christmas coming, about the Messiah being born . . . of course! But often the voices of the prophets *warn* about the Messiah's coming: “Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire” (Mal 3:2).

Who can stand? Someone whose words are thoughtless, hurt the feelings of others? Someone whose thoughts are selfish, greedy, lustful? Someone just standing around, indifferent to the King of the universe? No one can stand. Every single obstacle will be flattened. Nothing is allowed to stand in His way—least of all sin. John cries out, Isaiah cries out: “Prepare! Repent!” Advent is a time of repentance. When the Lord comes, anyone standing in sin will be bulldozed.

How much are we in need of comfort? We look for it everywhere. In our possessions. In getting more and more things. How many of us are looking forward to Christmas gifts? If not possessions, we look for comfort in other people. If I just make my wife or husband, or kids or bosses happy, then everything will be okay. Yet, everything in opposition to God will be flattened.

“Comfort, comfort, My people.” But where is the comfort, Isaiah? Where is the comfort, John? Where is the comfort in that voice calling us to repentance? Warning us that we are about to become pancakes!

Hear what else the voice has to say: “The voice said, ‘Cry out!’ And he said, ‘What shall I cry?’ ” (v 6a). I'll tell you what it cries!

A voice cries out that we have our own reasons to cry. “All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades” (vv 6b–8a). Where is the comfort in that? What hopelessness! What helplessness! What desperation! We are all like grass clippings they mow and throw out . . . just composting, rotting. Flowers—

beautiful, perhaps, for a few days . . . then wilted, drooping, dead. Pretty pessimistic, isn't it?

Pessimistic but we know it is accurate, don't we? Hair loss, crow's feet, a larger pant and dress size are constant reminders—we are fading already, each year as we get older and older. You know about feeling withered—like who knows how many days you get home from work and just want to crash bed or on the couch? Worse, things we try to accomplish often seem so futile. You spend years saving for retirement, then you lose the loved one you wanted to spend it all with. You think you have invested everything toward a loving, trusting relationship with your children, but something is broken down. You do all the right things to save yourself for your future spouse, prepare yourself for marriage, and then you start to wonder if anybody is going to come along for you.

A voice cries out: “The grass withers, the flower fades.” Where is the comfort in that?

Well, the truth is, if that is the way we see ourselves—as flowers, as grass—then there *is* comfort in the voice of Isaiah and the voice of John.

Because we are so helpless, it is indeed comforting to hear the voice of our God so strong, clear, irresistible!

“The grass withers, the flower fades, *But* the word of our God stands forever” (v 8, emphasis added). Did you hear that voice? How did it sound?

“The word of our God stands forever.” “The mouth of the LORD has spoken!” God's voice rings out as strong and clear and irresistible. When the herald announces that the Lord is coming, he comes! When the voice cries that every hill and valley will be leveled, nothing can resist him. How does *that* sound?

If we want to be big, tough, ruggedly independent, stand up to God or even stand up before God as we are—sin and all—if we're going to set ourselves up as mountains in God's way, then the last thing we want is a voice of God that's irresistible, that moves mountains. Then we want a god with a wimpy voice we can ignore. We want a god with a voice that speaks wishes but not truths, a god whose threats and promises will probably never happen. If that's the kind of voice we want to hear from God, then there's no comfort in the voice of Isaiah, of John, because the mouth of the Lord *has* spoken; the Word of our God *does* stand forever.

*But* if we realize that we really are grass, a flower that fades, then that's the very voice we want to hear. A voice that's strong, clear, irresistible, a voice whose promises will be accomplished, a voice that can give us the strength and

certainty we lack. Hear that voice of the Lord: “O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, And His arm shall rule for Him; Behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young. . . . ‘Comfort, yes, comfort My people!’ Says your God. ‘Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD’s hand Double for all her sins’ ” (vv 9–11, 1–2). Here’s comfort! Not just a wish or a nice idea. Something that *is* going to happen. In fact, something that *has* happened.

The Lord God has come, just as Isaiah knew, just as John proclaimed. He has come in Jesus Christ, God in the flesh for us. God in flesh to take away our iniquities, to bear the punishment for every single one of our sins. Jesus has come, lived, died on the cross, risen from the grave. Our iniquity been pardoned, forgiven. That was John’s message too for those who wanted to listen to the rest of it. Now the Messiah is gathering up his helpless lambs, holding us close to his heart, giving us the ultimate comfort found in Him. We might just as well say Jesus is carefully picking up the faded flowers, pressing them gently to a page to preserve and keep them forever. We may be aging, fading, but in Christ we have eternal youth. We may feel withered, crashed, at the end of the day, but Christ always refreshes, renews us for another, and gives us strength to bear our burdens. We may think our dreams, plans, families are coming to nothing, but Christ has plans for us beyond our wildest dreams. When the voice of the Lord speaks these promises, nothing can resist him. No obstacle will prevent his doing all this for us. There’s confidence in that strong, clear voice, isn’t there! There’s comfort for withered, faded souls.

A voice: “Make way!” A voice: “You’re grass.” But a voice of good tidings whose words will stand forever. A voice of comfort, yes, comfort for my people.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.