

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday In Advent, December 17, 2023

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 66, 55:1-2, 61, 75, 69:3.

Lessons: Psalm 119:49-56, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:1-12.

Sermon Text: Isaiah 40:1-2.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

I am sure that every one of you has received words and actions of comfort at times in your lives. Someone hugged you, held your hand, or just sat with you and told you that things will get better, that things will turn out all right.

Comfort is one of those things that it seems we need often, and that we need repeatedly. No one lives who will never need comfort.

What will give you the most comfort? Will you turn to words or music of the unbelieving world? Will you vainly turn to alcohol or other drugs trying to find comfort? Will you turn to friends and neighbors who do not believe as you do, who do not believe that Jesus Christ came to pay for all your sins and to give eternal life in heaven to you? Will you fill your life with activities? To the child of God such sources that people turn to for comfort will really seem foolish or outrageous, as if they can provide any real comfort at all. Please listen carefully as

GOD BRINGS A MESSAGE OF COMFORT

- 1. We find genuine comfort in what God says to us in his Word.**
- 2. The greatest possible comfort is knowing that *“sin has been paid for.”***

There are many reasons we need comfort. Pain, illness, and all kinds of hurts: physical, emotional, spiritual hurts. At the root of all of them is sin. Sin is the reason mankind needs comfort.

Isaiah was called to be a messenger of God. He was called to preach God’s law and judgment against sin and to tell of all the great things God has done.

If you were to walk up to a complete stranger and tell him or her ‘your sins are forgiven’ chances are that person would wonder what you are talking about. First of all, they might wonder ‘what sins are you talking about?’ and think that anything that they may have done wrong ‘isn’t that bad’. They may ask ‘what do you mean by talking about my sins?’

But in the same way Isaiah had the calling to speak ‘thus saith the lord,’ “this is what God says”, every Christian, every believer in Christ has the same calling.

We read God’s words: ***“Comfort, comfort my people.”*** Who should comfort them? Isaiah? Of course, but not only Isaiah. The command extends to more than just one person. In the Old Testament, God’s message of comfort came especially through the prophets and in the New Testament, through the evangelists and the apostles. But all who share the gospel also have God’s command to comfort his people. This applies to all believers as well as to all who serve as public ministers of God. You must remember that all believers share the important task of bringing God’s comfort to those who need it. We read in the New Testament: ***“we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”*** (2 Corinthians 5:20, CSB) Every follower of Christ has been given the command to ***“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”*** (Mark 16:15, NIV84)

God's messengers are to do more than point out the sinfulness of mankind. These words of Isaiah speaking comfort to people, are words that today tell what God has done about that sinfulness of mankind. The words of comfort we are talking about today is the Gospel message. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is words of comfort.

The Gospel means nothing if the Law has not been preached. We must learn from the Law of God that our sins condemn us to eternal damnation. We must learn from the Law that we cannot earn our salvation and that we deserve only temporal death and eternal punishment. God says "***Comfort, comfort my people.... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.***" The Gospel is words of comfort telling us first that the "***hard service has been completed.***"

Isaiah is talking first of all about the deliverance of God's people from Babylon, but God stretched the prophet's vision far into the future. Isaiah is looking forward to the final comfort that God would send to his people, and to all mankind. That comfort is found in Jesus Christ and what God did for you through him.

God says not just once but twice, "***Comfort, comfort my people.***" The command and the message of comfort comes from God. God sends this comfort for his people. He calls them "***my people.***" God's people are first of all in Isaiah's day the descendants of Abraham, the Jewish nation, the 'children of Israel'. After all their unfaithfulness, all their rebellion, all their sins, they are still his people. God remains their God, faithful and full of grace, as he promised to be, for example, in Exodus: "***The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.***" Exodus 34:6-7

We also read about the method by which the comfort was to be shared: "***Speak.***" Through the means of human language, God gives his comfort to humans. The process is simple. The comfort originates with God, who reveals it in human language so that it can be given to others in the same way, that is, using human language. The gospel comes in words, which are the means through which God extends his grace and mercy. "***Speak tenderly,***" God says. Speak to the heart, he tells his children. Use your voice.

God explains the message of comfort in this way: First, the hard service of God's people is completed. Second, their sins have been paid for, and third, God's people have received abundant blessings from the Lord. Each of these statements announces an action that has already taken place. It's done, even though all these things lie in the future. For the Jews in Isaiah's time, we know that they would be carried away as captives into Babylon. We also know that they would be allowed to return to Jerusalem. For the Jews in Isaiah's time Jesus, the One who would come to save people from their sins had not yet entered this world. But the events God announced were so certain that God speaks as if they had already been completed. No doubt exists about this future. You see, God doesn't just say something and not carry it out. He does what he says he will do! "***Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.***"

The word "***hard service***" refers to difficulty and trials. On the one hand, the end of the Babylonian captivity brought comfort to God's people. On the other hand, sin and death have forced chains of bondage upon every sinner. Every sinner longs for the announcement that he or she is free from the slavery of sin and death. Because Jesus has come, we are released from death. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are no longer locked in the dungeon because of God's anger and anticipating an eternity of punishment in hell. Our hard service is completed, not because we have achieved release by our own effort or because we have done our time and satisfied the law. Our bondage is over because God has achieved our release through his Son, the Messiah.

Then we read "***that her sin has been paid for.***" This assures us of the forgiveness of sins. The debt caused by every sinful, wicked thought and word and deed committed by God's people and by all humanity has been paid off. It has not been paid for by the 70 years of Judah's captivity. The nation of Judah could not atone for her own sins or for the guilt of anyone else. But her sins have been paid for. If Judah could not pay the debt, how would her sins be paid for? The answer provides the reason why Isaiah's Prophecy remains so important. Someone special will come to pay for her sins. In chapter 53, Isaiah clearly describes how this will happen. The sins of Judah and all the world will be paid for by the vicarious, substitutionary, suffering and death of the Servant of the Lord, God's only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Speaking of the future so surely as if it has already happened, we read "***The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.***" Isaiah 53:6.

We also read ***“that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”*** This emphasizes the grace of God. Isaiah tells us that God’s people receive a double portion of blessings from the hand of the Lord. The God of the covenant, Jehovah, the Savior-God, gives these blessings. The blessings originate in the heart of God. He possesses them, and he gives them to his people. The people do not deserve these blessings. They cannot be earned either by sacrifice or by suffering. Instead, God distributes them by grace, by his free and undeserved love.

He offers a double portion. The word double means that God’s blessings are abundant and beyond expectations. The sins of God’s people have deserved punishment, but God has offered forgiveness and eternal life instead of punishment.

God’s words were backed up and followed up with action. John’s Gospel assures us: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*** John 3:16 That Son of God came to earth, and in this Advent season we prepare again for the celebration of his coming.

So the real comfort that God gives is not just human words or hugs. The message to mankind is that ***“sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”*** The sins of God’s people have deserved punishment, but God has offered forgiveness and eternal life instead of punishment.

No sin is too great to be forgiven by God. His love for us, mankind, is so great that he sacrificed, he killed his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ to give us comfort.

The message is simply to be delivered by word: ***“Speak tenderly.”*** Through the means of human language, God gives his comfort to humans. The comfort comes from God, who reveals it in human language so that it can be given to others by words. The gospel comes in words, the words of the Gospel, the means through which God extends his grace and mercy. God has given this blessing to you. Give it away! ***“Speak tenderly,”*** God directs. Speak to others the message of forgiveness of sins because of what Jesus Christ did for mankind – and for you.

May you find such comfort every day in the Word of God! Amen.

(Revised from a Ministry By Mail sermon for December 11, 2011.)