

I'm sure most of us are familiar with Mariah Carey's hit song, "All I Want for Christmas is You." The song was released in 1994 and has set records as one of the most popular Christmas songs of all time. Of course, for Mariah Carey, it was a love song, but what if we asked ourselves, "All I want for Christmas is...what? What do I really want for Christmas?" I mean, if we look at the deepest longings of our heart, if we look deeper than just the desire for a new pair of jeans, a new relationship, or a new job, what do we really want?

Years ago, in 1887, Philip Brooks wrote another Christmas song in which he said of Bethlehem and the one born there, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Isn't that what we all really want? We want someone to look beneath the surface, fulfill our deepest hopes, and dispel our gravest fears.

Well, I have just the man to help us do that. His name is Isaiah. He was a prophet to Israel. Over the next few weeks, we'll look at some messages he gave and connect them with the Christmas story and the arrival of Jesus.

And the first thing Isaiah will show us is Jesus' arrival is very, very good news. I mean, isn't that something we all want for Christmas — good news? I read the SJ Mercury most every day, and to be honest; I get tired of all the bad news. We've got an impeachment hearing in Washington, a deadly volcano in New Zealand, E. coli in Romaine lettuce, gun violence in schools. It goes on and on. To make matters worse, the reason why we mostly hear bad news instead of good news is that bad news sells, while good news doesn't. Don't ask me why, but it's true.

Bad news attracts more attention than good news unless good news comes after some bad news. Think about it: You get let go at your job. That's bad news. But within a few days, you have an offer for an even better job — better pay, better future. That's excellent news! Or you get in a car accident, and you're told your car is totaled. That's bad news. But then you find out your insurance covers everything, and you're going to end up with an even better car. That's really good news. Or your physician says you're sick. That's bad news. The good news: there's a new treatment that has been almost 100 percent successful. You're going to be okay. That's really good news.

Don't get me wrong. The bad news does hurt. It's hard to get bad news. But the good news is even better when it comes after you've been hit with some bad news.

## **Background to Isaiah 40**

I think that's why this message found in Isaiah 40 was such good news for God's people. It came immediately after some very bad news. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are all about judgment. God says through Isaiah that Israel has been unfaithful to him, and he's going to judge them. That judgment will eventually come through the nation of Babylon, who'll conquer them and take them into exile. Isaiah 39 ends on this depressing note when Isaiah brings some bad news to King Hezekiah.

**Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." Isaiah 39:5-7**

That's very bad news. That's like saying you and even your kids have no future. But beginning with Isaiah 40, Isaiah delivers some good news on the heels of this bad news. He addresses the question that will be at the forefront of the exiles' minds: Is this the end of the line for us? Is God abandoning us forever? Is he washing his hands of us? God's answer comes through four different voices in this 40:1-11. All four offer some good news for Israel after this bad news. And since it's all ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, it's very good news for us today.

## **First voice: You are God's people whose sin has been double paid for**

**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. vv. 1-2**

The first voice, perhaps Isaiah's, is commanded to "comfort... speak tenderly...proclaim." This is an emotional plea, which is why he twice repeats the word, "Comfort." It is clear God isn't mad at his people, but rather he's gently inviting them and wooing them into relationship.

Do you know the story of Ruth and Boaz? When Boaz began showing interest in Ruth, she said to him, "*I've found favor in your sight, my lord, for you've comforted me and indeed spoken kindly to your maidservant...*" (Ruth 2:13 NASB). The words translated

"comforted" and "spoken kindly" (literally "spoken to the heart") are the exact same ones used here in Isaiah. Ruth was a widowed foreigner, a Moabite, but after she came to Bethlehem with Naomi, her mother-in-law, she was grafted into the people of God. King David would be her great-grandson.

Just as Boaz "comforted" and "spoke kindly" to this Moabite woman, Ruth, God comforts his people in exile. Notice he calls them "my people." He's not washed his hands of them. They're still his people. Even though they're far away from home, he calls them "Jerusalem" because he plans to bring them back there.

Then he says, "*Her hard service is completed...her sin has been double paid for...she has received from the Lord's hand double of all her sins.*" God is saying, "I forgive you. I'm not holding your sins against you. Payment for your sins has been made, not just in full, but double." What is that double payment? The first payment will be their years in exile. It's like a parent who grounds his teenager for a week, and when the week is over, they say, "Okay, your free now. You paid for your bad choices. I hope you learned a lesson." But what's the other payment? The other payment would be the sacrifice of a man Isaiah would call "the Servant of the Lord." Isaiah speaks of him a few chapters later,

**Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:4-6**

You see, this good news is all pointing to Jesus. Remember how the angel said to Joseph about Mary, "*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins*" (Mt. 1:21). Isn't it true, there are times in our life when we feel exiled because of our sin? We expect to be scolded, grounded, and frowned upon. We somehow think, "I've finally done it. I've finally out-sinned God's grace and love." But what does God do? He reaches out to us. He woos us. He comforts us. He speaks kindly to us. He says, "Your sin has been amply paid for. Jesus, my Servant, my Son, paid the penalty. No more exile for you. Come back home. Come back to Jerusalem."

It's like after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden. Before that, they enjoyed intimacy with God as he came to visit them in the Garden. But now it says when they heard the sound of the Lord walking in the Garden, they hid from him. Why are they hiding? They were full of guilt and shame. They thought God was done with them. They thought he was coming to banish them forever. They're in their own little exile. Instead, God came into the Garden in the cool of the day and called out, "Where are you?" Of course, God knew exactly where they were. But this question

isn't about geography; it's about relationship. Relationship is all about knowing and being known. In our sin, God comes looking for us. Payment has been amply made. He wants to restore intimacy, so he asks us to make ourselves known to him. He woos us, "Where are you?"

If you feel banished by God, in exile, he comes to you today to comfort you, not to speak harshly with you, but to speak kindly. He says, "Your sin has been more than paid for. Would you open yourself back up to me? Would you let yourself be known to me?"

## **Second voice: The King is coming, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed**

**A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken." vv. 3-5**

The good news here is the King is coming. Anyone who reads this would know that if a king is coming and going to use a road, you pave it so that it's as smooth as possible before he arrives. When verse three says, "*In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God,*" that's what it's talking about. It's announcing the arrival of a king.

When Jesus was born, a King came to earth. That's why, in all four Gospels, John the Baptist owns the voice of Isaiah 40:3 and calls the people out into the wilderness to repent, to change their sinful ways, to prepare for the coming of King Jesus. This King did not come like other kings to the corridors of power, but into the wilderness; into the place of austerity and simplicity.

Look at what this King does. Two things: First, he calls for a major renovation project. I like the way The Message puts it, "Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God. Fill in the valleys, level off the hills. Smooth out the ruts, clear out the rocks" (vv. 3b-4). This is talking about more than road construction; this is talking about repentance, which, of course, was the essence of John's message. Repentance is about opening ourselves up for change. You have to leave the city and go into the wilderness, so to speak. You leave that which is comfortable and seek comfort in the Lord. You face your sin squarely; you stop making excuses for it and confess it. You let God's Word disrupt your life. You smooth out the ruts and clear out the rocks. You stop asking the King to endorse your status quo; instead, you break up your status quo to make room for your King.

And when you do that, the King does something else. Verse five says, "*And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together.*" So the King will arrive in all his glory. Again, that's pointing us to Jesus. The Apostle John writes in chapter one: "*The*

*Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" God's glory was seen in the first coming of Jesus, and it'll be seen again on a worldwide scale when he returns.

Do you know we all crave glory? Why are so many people taken up with the 49ers right now? Why do we even care about 11 guys on the field we don't know? Because we crave glory. We're all junkies — on glory! Paul David Tripp, says,

**"There is a quest inside of us to be amazed, to wonder, to have something that is so great and so awesome and so compelling that we want to live for it. That we're willing to make sacrifices for it. It will be the thing that will get us up in the morning. That is true of all humanity."**

You see, if we're not captured by the glory of God seen in the face of Jesus, then we'll be captured by some lesser glory, and those things become our gods. Again, that's what repentance is all about — saying no to worshipping the glories this world offers us and preparing our hearts for the King of glory, Jesus Christ.

### **Third voice: God's word can be relied on**

The third voice is heard next. This voice is all about answering the question: Who can pull this off? I mean, it all sounds like good news, but how's it going to happen?

**A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." vv. 6-8**

There's a contrast here between humans and the word of God. Humans are frail and transitory. Like grass and flowers, we grow, wither, and die. The structure of the poem serves to start with all people and then focus on God's people to show that even Israel, who thought of themselves as the best of humanity, is transitory and unreliable. But God's word is different. God's word stands forever. God's word shapes history.

In the immediate context, this means the Lord will free his people from captivity; he'll lead them back to the promised land and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Babylon can't stop these things from happening, and the people of Israel can't make these things happen. If God says it will happen, it will happen. No one can stop it from happening, but neither can anyone make it happen.

But this applies to us as well. Who do we trust in? Do we trust in ourselves? Do we trust in humankind? Do we trust in technology or science or AI? *Time* magazine just named their person of the year: Greta Thunberg. She's a soft-spoken Swedish teenager who has become a global conscience for climate change. *Time's* editor said, "She became the biggest voice on the biggest issue

facing the planet this year, coming from essentially nowhere to lead a worldwide movement." With that, *Time* also put out its 100 most influential people in the world. It includes everyone from Pope Francis to Lady Gaga.

But who won last year? Do you remember? And who won the year before that? Flip through those old *Time* magazines, even just over the past few years, and you'll find a list of people you don't recognize, people who were the most influential in the world, but have faded into obscurity. You can't count on people. But you can count on God. Isaiah makes it clear that God's promise doesn't depend on us. It depends on God's word, and God's word always stands — that's good news!

### **Fourth voice: God will come with the strength of a warrior and the gentleness of a shepherd**

**You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. vv. 9-11**

This fourth voice is a commission to bring good news to Zion or Jerusalem; to lift up your voice and shout without fear. The good news is that God is going to show up. And the really good news is a startling revelation of what God is really like. He's portrayed in two ways.

First, he's the "Sovereign Lord" who comes with "power" and "he rules with a mighty arm." The Lord will come once again to Jerusalem as the mighty King, who goes to war to deliver his people. Notice how it also says "his reward is with him." This isn't a reward the Lord gives to us, but rather it's the reward he receives; it's HIS reward. What would that be? Get this: his reward is US. It's his people. The Lord's reward is the people he saved. "*For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance*" (Dt. 32:9). Psalm 33:12 says, "*Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.*" When this powerful King, who rules with a mighty arm, returns, he won't throw us out, but he'll show us off as his portion, his inheritance, and his reward.

Second, the Lord comes as a shepherd. This fourth voice says,

**"He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms, and he carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who have young."**

Back then, kings and leaders were often called shepherds. King David was a shepherd. But most of all, this points us to Jesus. Jesus said, "*I'm the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his*

*life for the sheep" (John 10:11), and, "I'm the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14). As a shepherd, Jesus is attentive to your individual needs. Vulnerable lambs need protection, so he gathers them and carries them. Notice how the "mighty arm" of the Lord of verse 10 is used in verse 11 to gather helpless lambs and carry them close to his heart. The Lord uses his strength to rescue, protect, and cradle. I love how he says, "he gently leads those who have young." Any young moms or dads here? You know the burden you bear — sleepless nights, constant feedings, and endless diapers to change. You need help. You need support, and he offers that. He gently leads those who have young. That's you, and that is very good news.*

Four voices with very good news:

First voice: We're God's people whose sin has been double paid for.

Second voice: The King is coming, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed.

Third voice: God's word can be relied on. You can't pull this off, but God can.

Fourth voice: God will come with the strength of a warrior and the gentleness of a shepherd

What do we do with this? We see the answer in verse nine, "*Go up on a high mountain...lift up your voice with a shout.*" God says, "I'm changing the narrative between us from pain to comfort, from judgment to grace. And now, I want you to change the subject in your world from despair to hope. My glory has entered your world in the person of Jesus." So don't be afraid to be hopeful in a world where cynicism is exalted as cool. Get up on a high mountain, where everyone can see you, and turn up the volume. Tell your generation about the real Jesus; be bold about it. He's not aloof and distant. He comes to comfort you, forgive you, fight for you, shepherd you, and gather you in his arms and carry you close. That's very good news. Isn't it amazing that the one final truth in all this world is also the best news in all this world?

We never know what tomorrow will bring. But if God has promised us the glorious presence of our Shepherd King forever, let that hope put compassion in our hearts for everyone who feels godforsaken the way we once did. He is your God. He wants to be their God too. You don't need to be eloquent or smart or famous to lift up your voice. You just need to have experienced being in exile, like everyone else. But you've also heard the promise of the

gospel and felt the comfort of the gospel. And you've opened up to your King in repentance. You've got something to say. You, like Isaiah, are a prophetic presence in the world today. The worse things get in our nation, the more your gospel voice is needed. Isn't it a privilege to have a comfort to share that's so genuine, so enduring, so worthy it overrules our selfish comforts?

Or maybe you've never really heard or understood this good news before. You may still have a lot of questions, but deep down, you know this is what you really want. You want a God who comes not with condemnation but with kindness. You want a God whose arm is mighty enough to save and gentle enough to gather you like a helpless lamb. Maybe today is the day you say, "Yes" to this good news. Maybe today is the day you believe it and embrace it for the first time.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2018 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA  
Catalog No. 1440-1SC