

Our Christmas Series is called "All I want for Christmas." We are in Isaiah Chapter 40, which will show us some very good news. I mean, isn't Good News something we all want for Christmas?

I want to tell you a story that helped me understand how God works when we are tired of seeing bad news everywhere, especially in ourselves. My oldest daughter was maybe six, and she and I were on a long car trip to visit my family. I remember we stopped at Burger King in a truck stop on I-5 for lunch, and at that time, there were no family restrooms. I needed to let her go into the women's bathroom alone while I waited outside. So, while I was waiting outside the bathroom, I heard her little voice, "Daddy! The door is stuck." I'm like, "Katie, just jiggle it." "Daddy, it's not opening, get me out of here!"

Well, I needed to do something. My 6-year-old was locked in a bathroom stall, and Julie was not with me. I slowly opened the door of the women's bathroom and announced loudly to anyone within earshot that I was coming in. I entered the bathroom, went to her stall, and starting shaking the door. It wasn't opening. By this time, Katie was beginning to sob. So what does a good dad do? I got down on my back on the dirty floor and slid myself under the door and came up into her stall.

The very next thing I did, was not to go for the door latch and open it to set her free, which seems like the intuitive thing to do. Nope, my very next thing was to grab my sobbing daughter in my arms and hug and comfort her in the locked stall. And just my presence with her immediately turned what was a terrifying experience into a fun adventure. And yes, with a shoulder lunge, the door latch released, and we were set free. But as far as Katie was concerned, my presence set her free even while we were still locked in the stall.

Some of us are in bad situations this morning, where we feel alone and trapped in a stall, and we can't get out. You beg God to set you free. Maybe your marriage is falling apart, or you have health issues. Maybe a loved one has passed, and this is your first Christmas without them, or maybe your teen is making poor choices. Maybe a friend has betrayed you, or a work situation seems impossible, or you are living with an addiction that is destroying your family. You sit alone and discouraged by all the bad news. Hope is running low.

Every one of us has at one time been locked in a bathroom stall. We cry out, "God open the door! Bring me some good news!" And just when you are about to conclude I am preaching that

God is cruel for not opening your door. I want you to know that he loves you so much he often chooses to slide under the locked door to enter in and comfort you in that locked stall. So often, that is his way. This is the way he makes disciples. For those who love God, everything is one day redeemable, even useful to him and his kingdom.

Today if you feel trapped in a stall, may God give you comfort as you take time to listen to him and be comforted by his Good News. If you need good news today, Isaiah 40 is the right place for you.

In fact, George Frederic Handel wrote the music for his famous Christmas classic, *Messiah*, with our need for good news in mind. His first line is a King James quote from Isaiah 40, and it reveals God's understanding of our need for Good News. His opening line is a perfect place to start our Christmas Series. "'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people', saith your God" (Handel's *Messiah*).

So what is the context of Isaiah 40? When Isaiah wrote these words from God, the people of Israel really needed to hear them. After King Solomon's reign, Israel went through a terrible civil war and split into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom and watched as the Northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. The first half of Isaiah is dedicated to this defeat at the hands of the Assyrians.

But in chapter 40, Isaiah shifts focus some 150 years into the future when he predicts the falling of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians. And just as Isaiah had said, the Southern Kingdom did fall to the Babylonians in 596 BC. The fall of both kingdoms was terrible for God's people. Many were killed, their temples and cities were ransacked. Many were taken from their homelands and locked up in exile in Babylon. It's as if they were being locked in a strange bathroom stall and the door wouldn't open to set them free for 70 years. Yet, Isaiah brought them words of comfort. God slipped in through the locked door and stayed beside his people to comfort them with words, as we see here in Isaiah 40.

We broke the first eleven verses down to the four voices of Good News.

Good News of Comfort

Comfort is a word we all like. And it takes different shapes for each of us. Where do you find comfort? If you could describe a really comfortable day, what would it look like? For me, I think of a long run, or a long walk with Julie, a couple of good meals, a good movie we could enjoy together. You can think of your comfortable day. Your day may include a scripture, a good book, a pair of slippers, a hobby, maybe a 49er victory.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Isaiah 40:1

After 39 chapters of judgment, defeat, and exile because of their sin, Isaiah begins chapter 40 with God saying, "Comfort." In fact, for emphasis, God says it twice, "Comfort, Comfort, my people." Notice the personal pronoun: God says, "my" people. What is the comfort that Isaiah predicted?

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. v. 2

What is God saying here? He's saying, "I forgive you. I'm not holding your sins against you. Payment for your sins has not just been made in full, but double." We are not just talking about a mistake here and there; we are talking about centuries of disobedience that had been mounting and mounting. All that sin has been paid for. What is that double payment? The first payment was years being trapped in exile. But what's the other payment? The other payment would be the sacrifice of a man Isaiah calls the servant of the Lord. Isaiah speaks of this servant of the Lord a few chapters later in Chapter 53.

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

Maybe you are starting to see it. The Good News for Christmas all points to Jesus. These prophecies of Isaiah were not just for the exiles in Babylon; they were meant as promises for all that was yet to come. Remember what the angel said to Joseph in the Christmas Story? *"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save people from their sins"* (Mt. 1:21).

Comfort is all about the relationship. It's good news that God comes looking for us no matter where we are or what we have done. Payment for our sins has been generously made. If you feel banished by God, in some sort of exile, he comes to you today to comfort you, not to speak harshly to you, but to speak kindly to you. Whatever you are going through today, know this, the

greatest comfort you can know is that God is with you, and he is working in you.

Not only does he discipline those he loves, but he also meets your deepest need by doing the work necessary to forgive every one of your sins. Here is the comfort: Whether you live or die, whether your life is easy or hard right now, whether you will see justice or not, whether your prayers will be answered exactly as wish, you are "his people," and your sins have been forgiven because of Jesus. Your sins are fully paid.

There is a second voice from God who says: There is good News:

Good News that the Glory of the Lord is 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. v. 3

Anyone who would hear these words would know immediately that a king was coming. There would be a parade. A herald would lead the parade announcing the coming king. And there would be a royal highway built for the king. Listen to the massive road construction needed to build a road fit for a king's journey to his people.

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. v. 4

For this king, the road must be perfectly smooth. It must be graded, paved, and smoothed. Every obstruction must be removed. Earth must be moved to fill in every valley and raze every mountain. As Handel said, "Lift up the valleys. Put down the hills. Make a level plain, a straight path. Prepare the way for the King is coming."

Isaiah was not talking literally about a building project here. He was talking about God accomplishing his purpose in our lives. For these Jews exiled into Babylon, penitence, sorrow, and remorse over their sins was their preparation to receive their king.

This should sound familiar to some of us. Centuries later, a broader fulfillment of this prophecy would happen. A man named John prepared the way for God in the flesh. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John called people to repent, to change their sinful ways, to prepare for the coming of King Jesus. John told his followers to face their sin, to stop making excuses, to confess, to let God's word expose the ruts and rocks and fill the potholes in their hearts, to remove anything that gets in the way of making their hearts fit for a king.

And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." v. 5

Hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah was pointing to Jesus as the good news. And Jesus, in his first coming, revealed God's glory. The apostle John writes,

“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.” John 1:14

And God's glory will be seen again on a worldwide scale when he returns. One of my favorite Biblical teachers is Paul David Tripp. He says,

“There is a quest inside 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 are willing to make sacrifices for it. It will be the thing that gets us up in the morning. That is [true for] all of humanity.”

But here is the deal. Paul Tripp is telling us if we are 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 will become our gods. And this is what repentance is all about. Calling out the glories, this world has to offer and saying no to worshipping them, and instead of preparing our hearts for the King of Glory.

Want some good news? No matter where you are in life right now, even if it's a bathroom stall in Burger King at a truck stop, if you want to receive the kind of comfort that only our creator can bring, prepare your heart, make room in your heart, invite him to flood into every dark corner of your heart and you will find comfort. Welcome the King to reorder your life, to crush your sin cravings, to flatten your pride, to smooth out your roughness, to fill in those low places of sadness.

There is a third voice.

Good News of the Certainty of God's Word

This voice is all about answering the question: “Who can pull this off?” I mean, Who can pull off true comfort? Who can pull off sins paid for double? Who can pull off the revealing of God's glory?

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

This section doesn't sound like very good news until we read the final phrase: “The Word of God endures forever.” God's word endures but not people or their institutions. I think the best way to understand this is that Isaiah is putting a proper perspective on God's enemies. The Assyrians and Babylonians conquered them. They were too big and powerful to overcome. Yet they wouldn't last forever. They were pawns in God's master plan to bring his people's hearts back to himself. God's words were, “I'm going to free my people from captivity and lead them back to the promised land and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.” The people of

Babylon and Assyria couldn't stop this from happening, and the people of Israel cannot make this happen. But if God says it will happen. It will happen.

But how is this good news for us today? As big as your problem may seem, as dry as the wilderness you may be in, as lonely in exile as you may feel, God's word is bigger. Your circumstances are temporary. God's word is forever.

Remember when Jesus was in the boat, and the storm came upon the sea of Galilee. These disciples, many of them fishermen were scared. When a fisherman is scared on the water, everybody should be scared! So they did the right thing. They took their circumstances to Jesus. When they woke him up in the back of the boat, he said to the wind and the waves, “Peace, be still” (Mk. 4:39), and everything was stilled. Those disciples' circumstances were temporary, but the word of God is forever.

You don't have the final word on your circumstances. It's not over until he says it's over. Until then, know that as bad as it may seem, God is not done yet. This Christmas find comfort in this voice of Good News: God's word will endure over your problems. God's word will endure forever.

And there is one more voice.

Good News that God Comes with the Strength of a Warrior and with the Gentleness of a Shepherd

This fourth voice starts as instruction given to God's people to bring the good news to Mt. Zion and all of Jerusalem.

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!” v. 9

This fourth voice says to declare without fear that God is going to show up in their lives. They can bank on it. And the good news is that God is really going to show up in your life. You can bank on it. In verses 10-11, God is portrayed in two ways. First, he is the Sovereign Lord.

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. v. 10

He comes with power, and he rules as king. And He brings with him his reward. This isn't a reward the Lord gives us. This reward is what HE receives. We are his reward. Psalm 33:12 says, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.” And this prophecy broadens even more. In Revelation, we read that the Sovereign Lord will return in something called the second advent in the future, and he won't throw us out. Instead, he will show us off. We are his portion, his inheritance, his reward. Now that's some good news. The four voices also tell us the Lord comes as a shepherd.

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. v. 11

In the Old Testament, wise and good kings were also called shepherds. We know King David was a shepherd. But most of all, this points to David's direct descendant, Jesus. Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*" (John 10:11), and then Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me*" (John 10:14).

The good news is that this King/Shepherd is attentive to your needs this Christmas. He knows you are vulnerable and need protection. So, he gathers us and carries us close to his heart. The mighty arm used to rule is also a tender arm to gather and carry the helpless.

And a special word for young parents this morning. God knows the burden you bear, the sleepless nights, the constant feedings, and diaper changes. It's a blessing to be a grandparent. But you need help. He notices you. Look to the shepherd for guidance.

We have heard four voices that tell us where true comfort is found: The voice that tells us that our sins are forgiven, the voice that says that God's glory is revealed in Jesus, the voice that tells us God's word is reliable, and the voice that tells us that God comes to us with the strength of a warrior to fight our enemies, and with the tenderness of a shepherd who knows us and cares for us.

What do we do with this? One answer takes us back to verse nine.

Good News that Brings Comfort to Others

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!" v. 9

Isaiah is telling us not to be afraid to share the good news this Christmas. Do not be afraid to tell your story about how God's forgiveness has brought you comfort. When topics of conversation in your circles lead into despair, you can change the narrative and interject hope. Contribute good news to the conversation.

Christmas is only a Merry Christmas when you realize you need good news. We have good news about the real Jesus to tell our generation. Isaiah says to be bold. You have the best news in the world. He is your God, and he wants to be their God too. You don't need to be eloquent. You just need to have experienced having been trapped like an exile like everyone else. But what

makes you different is that you heard the promise of the gospel and felt the comfort of the gospel. And you have opened up to the King in repentance. So you have something to say that is so real, so enduring, and so worthy of your efforts.

I'd like to ask you one more question? Let's turn the tables and ask this final question.

What Good News Can We Give Jesus this Christmas? That Every Heart Prepares Him Room.

What I pray for is that when you hear about God's love, God's mercy, and comfort, you're struck to the core of your heart. That if you believe that what you hear is true, that Isaiah 40 is really what God is like, that you would examine your heart because you want that more than anything. I hope you are passionate about preparing your heart, so it is fit for the arrival of your King.

Perhaps there are some reading this who have asked Jesus into their hearts and prayed a prayer. Though you say, "Yes, I am a sinner, and yes, I need Jesus," you would do well to consider if there is a real hatred for sin. If there is a real turning from and forsaking sin. It's one thing to weep with sorrow over the consequences of our sin. But it's quite another to weep with sorrow over our sin we committed against our Holy Savior who died for us. It's one thing to have regrets; it's another thing to have true, Spirit-led repentance.

There's likely lots of stuff going on in your life in secret that nobody even knows about. All I want to say in conclusion is don't neglect what the Spirit may be doing in your life now. Don't ignore your heart preparations as you get busy with your event preparations for Christmas. There is great danger that we can be temporarily stirred and not changed.

If the Spirit is doing something in your heart to prepare the way of the Lord, you don't want to miss that. If it is happening, it is the best Christmas present you could ever give back to Jesus this year.

I think the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts understood the greatest gift we could ever give Jesus because he wrote these words in his great Christmas hymn.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Let earth receive her King;

Let every heart prepare Him room,

And Heaven and nature sing..."

Let's respond in worship for who God is and what he has done for us.

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

© 2019 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1442-1FC