

Isaiah 40:1-11

Waiting for Strength

Early this week when the temperatures had plunged into the low twenties with a wind chill that dropped that down into the -30 to -35 range, I decided to make a pot of stew for dinner in the crock pot. As we got home each of us took in the smell of the simmering combination of meat, potatoes, carrots, onion, spices and more. As we sat down one said, "Oh! comfort food. So nice on such a cold day." Later on, we sat down on our recliners and put our feet up to get comfortable. And when it was time for bed and I snuggled up under the comforter, I gave thanks for the comfort of my bed that welcomed me to a night of rest.

We like to be comfortable. We joke in the church about people having their comfortable pews. Now of course, our wooden pews might not always feel that comfortable, especially if your back and butt are not good on hard seats, but the comfort comes from being in a familiar spot with the people you are used to having around you nearby.

I have seen the same thing happen at conferences. People find "their" spot and gravitate back to it and the people they are with, even if they have never met them before. Where and how we sit, whether in a restaurant, our vehicles, or our homes, has a lot to do with comfort. In September Ken bought me a new office chair as a gift, but he let me choose it. I spent a few minutes at Staples sitting in every one of the display chairs until I found the one that was most comfortable.

We talk about comfort zones. Sometime we like to stay in them, other times we choose to stretch ourselves and move out of our comfort zones. So comfort is a big part of culture and conversation.

We also talk about comforting those who grieve and that is likely the closest we are going to get to what is meant by comfort in the opening words of the scripture from Isaiah 40. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." When the prophet is talking about comfort it is not about how comfortable you are, it is about bringing comfort to souls that are tormented, weary, hurt.

You see, Isaiah 40 comes after 39 chapters of warning about judgement for sin and wandering away from God's intent and purposes for human relationships. God's intention was that people would flourish in loving, compassionate, grace-filled relationships with God and one another; that we would be image bearers of God. Instead, there was sinful behaviour where people did not care for those in need, didn't concern themselves with God's will, did what they wanted. At the time it seemed lives, worship, authority, all of it was more concerned with power than whether or not

everyone had food to eat and a place to be safe. That is a watered-down Coles-notes version of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, but it leads us to where we are in this passage. And it doesn't seem to far from what is going on in our world even yet.

At this point in the writing, Jerusalem has fallen and is captive to an aggressive and brutal regime, they have been suffering for a long time under extreme conditions. Their identity and culture, worship and homeland, in the hands of another power. Their sinfulness had led them to a place of destruction. After years of oppression the people were waiting for God. Waiting for God's comfort. Waiting for God's strength to get them out of this mess. Into this circumstance Isaiah speaks the words, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her time, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Their wait is over.

Then a voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God...Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." In other words, God is on the way, it is time to prepare. And how does one prepare for God? Well in a way that sounds down right groveling to those of us who would prefer to make our own way in the world.

The prophet tells people, "You are like grass, or a flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades." In other words, you have no power, you won't last forever, the world does not revolve around you. Not really a message any of us is keen to hear. Most of us like to think we have some influence, power, or authority, but in comparison to God we are like grass or flowers.

Preparing the way for the Lord means acknowledging that we are sinful and asking for forgiveness. N.T. Wright, a respected biblical scholar, teacher, and preacher, defines sin as "the human failure of vocation, with all that this entails. When we sin, we abuse our calling, our privileges, and our possibilities. Our thoughts, words, and actions have consequences. They were meant to. That is what being image-bearers [of God] is all about. Sin risks replacing good consequences with damaging ones. Turning away from the source of life, we invite death to fill the vacuum."¹

The Good News in Isaiah, in the Christmas story, in our lives, is that God does not leave us in our sin. Though we are like grass that withers or flowers that fade, God's word stands forever and that Word is love. When we choose to acknowledge our weakness, our sinfulness, our desire to be our own power, and turn to God, in tenderness God comes with might to reclaim you, to love you, to give you life, to give you strength, the

¹ Wright, N.T. *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*. Harper Collins Publishers. New York. 2016. P84.

strength that you have been waiting for to endure and hold on, the strength you have been waiting for in order that change can happen.

The last line of this passage from Isaiah says, God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” This to mean that God will comfort you, God will love you, and God will give you the strength you have been waiting for to face your trials and tribulations.

In the last while, I have sat beside or prayed for and with people who were dying, people who have been suffering, people who are afraid of treatments, procedures, and surgeries, people who are hurting, people who are feeling lost, and my hope is always that God will bring them comfort and peace in the midst of their troubles. That people would know God with them through the power of the Holy Spirit in the minds, bodies, and spirit. I have learned this by following the lead of one such as Isaiah. Each of us has the opportunity to do that for others, to be the light in the darkness, the voice in the desert, the face, hands, and feet of God’s comfort and strength. We are not the Saviour, we are not God, but through our image bearing we can represent God’s comfort. And as people made in the image of God, loved by God, we can know and trust that God is on the way, is already here, and will always be with us, to comfort, guide, and be our strength.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.