

Second Sunday in Advent; December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

Three Beautiful Turns

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her.  
Her warfare really is over.  
Her guilt is fully paid for.  
Yes, she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

A voice is calling out:  
In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD.  
In the wasteland make a level highway for our God.  
Every valley will be raised up,  
and every mountain and hill will be made low.  
The rugged ground will become level,  
and the rough places will become a plain.  
Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all flesh together will see it.  
Yes, the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

A voice was saying, "Cry out!"  
And I said, "What shall I cry out?"  
All flesh is grass,  
and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside.  
Grass withers, flowers fade,  
when the breath of the LORD blows on them.  
Yes, the people are grass.  
Grass withers, flowers fade,  
but the Word of our God endures forever.

Get up on a high mountain,  
O Zion, you herald of good news.  
Lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, you herald of good news.  
Lift up! Do not be afraid!  
Say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"  
Look, God the LORD will come with strength,  
and his arm is ruling for him.  
Look, his reward is with him.  
The result of his work is in front of him.  
Like a shepherd he will care for his flock.  
With his arm he will gather the lambs.  
He will lift them up on his lap.  
He will gently lead the nursing mothers.

Do you like stories with surprise turns? Well, here's one for you. Three, actually. Three stories with surprise turns, all beautiful.

Here's story number one: Once there was a king named Hezekiah. He ruled a fading little kingdom called Judah, which had just survived a frightening siege. The army of the Assyrians surrounded Judah's capital city of Jerusalem. They taunted and threatened and cursed King Hezekiah and all the people. Judah appeared to be done for, at the hands of a nation known for wiping other nations completely off the map.

But the Lord saved Hezekiah and Jerusalem from the Assyrians. Then King Hezekiah became very ill and approached death. And the Lord saved him again! First from the Assyrians, then from fatal illness. Wouldn't you think by this point that Hezekiah would have learned his lesson? If you want to be saved, lean on the Lord.

Hezekiah, however, like most sinners, was an amazingly slow learner. After he recovered from his illness, he looked to the east and saw menacing Assyria still out there, regrouping and recovering to attack again. And where did Hezekiah go for help? To an up-and-coming kingdom called Babylon, Assyria's most serious rival. He invited and welcomed officials from Babylon into his palace and showed off all the wealth of Judah as if to say, "Hey, Babylon. If you want to take out Assyria, we can help. We've still got a little muscle here in Judah."

And what was wrong with that, you ask? Nothing, necessarily. Good kings use their noggins and make useful alliances to protect their people. And when you're the king of God's chosen nation, you have a sacred responsibility to protect your people.

It wasn't that Hezekiah sought an alliance with Babylon that angered the Lord and his prophet Isaiah. It's that he did without trusting in the Lord as his ultimate source of help. Even after the Lord saved Hezekiah and Judah from the Assyrians the first time, even after he saved Hezekiah from death, he still trusted Babylon more than the Lord to help him.

And so the Lord sent his prophet Isaiah to Hezekiah to say, "All right, smart guy. Here's what's going to happen: Assyria won't get you. But Babylon will. The nation you trusted more than the Lord will be the one, someday in the future, to conquer your kingdom." Amazingly, Hezekiah was pleased by that news. He calculated that he would be dead and gone by the time Babylon was strong enough to conquer Judah. So he actually wiped his brow and said, "Peace in my time."

If that phrase rings a bell, it's because Neville Chamberlain (unbelievably!) quoted it after appeasing the Nazis at Munich. "Peace for our time," the Prime Minister said, apparently unaware of the original context of that quote. Peace for our time, peace in my time. You know what that means: death and destruction later on. Peace in my time is great, as long as you don't live in the next time.

So imagine if you lived in Judah years later and read that story on Isaiah's scroll. "That silly King Hezekiah sold us out. Babylon is now the strongest nation, and now they are coming for us. And everything Isaiah said would happen is about to happen. We're dead meat."

Sorry for all the history. But if you want to appreciate just how sharp and sudden the turn in this story is, you need that background. Because it's from that point – assured destruction by Babylon – that Isaiah turns faster than a Camaro: **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her. Her warfare really is over. Her guilt is fully paid for. Yes, she has received from the**

**LORD's hand double for all her sins.** Jerusalem's suffering would end; the day would come when the Lord would devastate their enemies and bring them home again.

The Lord himself was coming to help and save his people from the wasteland and wilderness of exile. He himself was coming to clear a path home again and bring his people back. **A voice is calling out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD. In the wasteland make a level highway for our God. Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain will be made low. The rugged ground will become level, and the rough places will become a plain.** Because, after all, Babylonians are rough and tough. But in the end, they are only mortal men. They are no match for the Lord's indestructible word: **All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside. Grass withers, flowers fade, when the breath of the LORD blows on them. Yes, the people are grass. Grass withers, flowers fade, but the Word of our God endures forever.** The Lord himself was coming to save, to bring his people home, by rescuing them from mortal men. And for the Lord it takes no more effort than a breath, just a word of judgment for his enemies and salvation for his people.

Unless you're a student of the Old Testament, you may be hearing for the first time – or the first time in a long time – the sudden and beautiful spin to this story that God inspired Isaiah to proclaim, to bring hope and healing to the broken hearts of his people. But that's only the first story, with its sudden and beautiful turn. These verses are about a lot more than the Old Testament nation of Israel and the Lord's salvation from exile in Babylon.

Here is the second story, with its own quick turn. When Isaiah proclaims that flesh is grass, it is not only the flesh of Babylonians. It's yours and mine, too: **All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside...Yes, the people are grass. Grass withers, flowers fade...** When God first formed human flesh, he breathed his own breath into that flesh, and blessed it with his own holy image. It was not God's loving plan to blow death on us, but it is the wages of that first man's fall, and the penalty of all our sin. In sin, all human flesh withers and fades into death.

We fade in sin; that is the sick half of the second story. But here is its sudden and lovely turn: **but the Word of our God endures forever.** God spoke a word to the human race after Adam fell: **"For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."** But even before he spoke that word, he spoke another. It was the first promise of a Savior from sin and death, spoken to the one who pulled Adam into death: **"I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will crush his heel."** That was the first promise of a Savior from sin and withering death. Because the Word of the Lord endures forever, it was promise repeated for thousands of years in dozens of ways. It was a promise repeated again by a wild man in the wilderness, when the Savior had finally arrived and was preparing to begin his public ministry. **A voice is calling out: In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD.**

In the wilderness John proclaimed the Lamb of God, who came to take away the sin of the world, and free all human flesh from eternal death in hell. This is God's ultimate Word of salvation; it is about much more than Jewish exiles saved from Babylon. It is about all sinners forgiven and freed from hell. **Look, God the LORD will come with strength, and his arm is ruling for him. Look, his reward is with him. The result of his work is in front of him.** Our Savior did occasionally flex his muscles during his ministry. He drove out legions of demons, miraculously healed demons, and even raised the dead. But his strongest strength was in humility, his willingness to lower himself and be born of a virgin, to suffer abuse and execution to save us from sin and death. That is his true strength. And the reward of his work is our salvation. The result,

Isaiah says, is right in front of him. It's easy to see, it's easy to hear. The Word of the Lord spoken from the cross, the Word that stands forever: "It is finished."

It is the second sudden and splendid turn in these verses: human flesh withers in sin. But the Lord speaks a word of salvation that stands forever. John the Baptist proclaims it in the desert and then the Savior goes to work, mighty in humility, rewarding us with freedom from sin and eternal death.

But there is still one more story here, with one more wonderful turn. The third story in these verses is the Lord God looking you personally in the eye and demanding your repentance. That's the story John the Baptist found here. The unbelieving heart is a wasteland, full of valleys and mountains and rugged terrain that your Savior will not travel. He must be received on the smooth, straight path of faith. The Word of the Lord that endures forever is also the word John cried in the desert, the word Jesus spoke to open his ministry: "Repent! The kingdom of heaven is near!"

This story is very personal and eternally important. Jesus also said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." I don't know about you, but this story is scary. How can a thoroughly sinful wasteland of a human heart – yours, mine, or anyone else's – smooth itself out? On our own, how can we see our sins not as foibles or minor imperfections, but eternally damnable offenses, and then be sufficiently sorry for them? How can our mountains of pride admit our hopeless situation and turn to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness?

That's what repentance is: sorrow for sin and turning to Jesus for forgiveness. What proud sinful heart can do it? None. But here's the splendid turn in the story of your repentance: it doesn't come from you at all. Watch carefully: **Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The rugged ground will become level, and the rough places will become a plain.** All those verbs are passive. Amazing! Repentance is not something you produce in yourself, anymore than a mountain can lower itself or a road can smooth itself out. It is work that must be done to them.

And so God has worked in your heart the repentance he demands. He has used his holy law to open your eyes to your sin and make you sorry for it. And he has used the good news of Jesus in Word, water, and Supper to turn your heart to Jesus in faith. Even during this message, as you heard of your withering sin and the Lord's enduring word of salvation, the Holy Spirit was working for you, on your heart, renewing your repentance.

And so this third story, the one of repentance, also has a soothing little epilogue: **Like a shepherd he will care for his flock. With his arm he will gather the lambs. He will lift them up on his lap. He will gently lead the nursing mothers.** When Isaiah says **the Word of our God endures forever**, we should take every possible comfort from that. The Word of God is not just the Bible, and not just the eternal promise of salvation. The Word is also Jesus himself. Not only does the promise of salvation endure forever, but so does the One who did the saving: Jesus. He lives still and loves you always. He endures forever as your Good Shepherd; he has gathered you into his flock with his own arm, he holds you in his lap and leads you gently through this trouble to heavenly peace.

The story of your repentance, worked and maintained in your heart by the Spirit, is also the story of Jesus holding you tight and leading in love every day, until the end of days. Amen.