

Natalie W. Bell
 December 10, 2023
 2nd Sunday Advent

Comfort and Peace
Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

² ***Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,***
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

³ ***A voice cries out: "In the wilderness **prepare the way of the Lord,*****
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ ***Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;***
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

⁵ ***Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together,***
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

⁶ ***A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"***

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ ***The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;***
surely the people are grass.

⁸ ***The grass withers, the flower fades; but the **word of our God will stand forever.*****

⁹ ***Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]***
lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b] lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

¹⁰ ***See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;***
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

¹¹ ***He 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.***

For me, it's ***not Thanksgiving*** without
 turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy.

And it's ***not Christmas*** without a tree, a nativity set,
 candlelight, and of course—some music from Handel's *Messiah*.
 Listening to the *Messiah* just makes it feel like Christmas.

What makes it ***feel like Christmas*** to you?

What are the comforts you look forward to?

I think we all want to experience some *comfort* at Christmas. Especially when so much has happened in our communities, Our country and our world.

The *prophet Isaiah* knew how much we need God's comfort. In fact, Handel's *Messiah* begins with the words from Isaiah 40—*Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people....*

Isaiah was speaking to the *people EXILED in Babylon*. The people of Israel had been conquered, and forcibly removed from their home. Their temple had been destroyed and their homeland decimated.

They felt that life as they knew it—was over. Certainly their *way of worship and faith* seemed over.

I think it's hard for us to *imagine how these exiles felt*. It would be like stepping into the shoes of a refugee. It was a horrible and hopeless circumstance.

And it was to *that context* that Isaiah spoke about comfort. I suspect many people were skeptical. But then they heard more from the prophet.

Did you know that some of Isaiah's words Are the *most searched and bookmarked verses* in the Bible?

The most *searched, read and bookmarked verse* of 2023 in the YouVersion Bible App is the same one since 2020: *Isaiah 41:10*: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

This reflects the verse people *highlighted, bookmarked, and shared* the most. The CEO of You Version Bobby Gruenewald says: "From a global perspective, we've all been through a lot in the last few years, so it's no surprise that people continue to feel drawn to the hope and peace promised in Isaiah 41:10, ...it's encouraging to see people continue to cling to God and His Word in their greatest moments of need." <https://jubileecast.com/articles/30292/20231127/youversion-reveals-the-most-popular-bible-verse-for-2023.htm>

Doesn't God's Comfort comes through the Word in amazing and powerful ways?
We hear it from the Bible like no other book, don't we?

What are some of YOUR most comforting Bible verses?

Where do you go to in God's Word for hope and peace?

Do you ever go to Isaiah?

What about The Psalms? Maybe **Psalm 23**: *The Lord is my shepherd..*

What about **Jeremiah 29:11**: *I know the plans I have for you....*

Or Jesus' own words? **John 11:25**: *I am the resurrection and the life...*

Or **John 16:33**: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

There are literally ***thousands of verses of comfort in the Bible***,

Just waiting for us to draw upon them, like drawing water from a well!

They are words that can literally ***quench*** our thirsty souls.

And the prophet ***Isaiah is a master*** at providing words of ***comfort***.

Although Isaiah begins by talking about the unfaithfulness of God's people that led to the exile,

Isaiah then focuses on the comfort the people need ***during*** exile.

Isaiah wants to remind them that their exile is not forever, ***God will restore them***.

So Isaiah 40 begins like a ***heavenly courtroom scene---***

where God says these people have paid for their sins,

and now they ***deserve comfort***. Jessica Miller Kelley, editor. *Every Valley: Advent with the Scriptures of Handel's Messiah*. WJK: Louisville, 2014. Pg. 5

And what is that comfort like?

It's like a ***shepherd*** who feeds his flock;

who gathers the lambs in his arms,

and carries them close to his heart,

and gently leads mother sheep.

This comfort is also a time of PREPARATION.

Isaiah says '*prepare the way of the Lord*'.

This is about the coming of the Messiah.

But at the time it was an even more immediate comfort.

His comfort was to get the people ***ready***—for their ***return from exile***,

AND the day when God would make ALL things right,

In the *coming of a Savior*.

Which is just like our Advent season.

Advent is the season where we prepare our hearts,
for Christ's *birth* on December 25th.

And Christ's *return* at the end of all time.

I was reading Diana Butler Bass' reflections on the coming and return of Jesus
That we celebrate during Advent.

And she suggests that the ancient mystic Bernard of Clairvaux
may have been right to point out **3 Advent events**—
A first Advent, *the birth of Jesus*—in the past,
The third Advent—*the return of Jesus*—in the future,
And a *middle, Second Advent*---the coming of Christ's spirit, right now.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the great medieval theologian of love,
wrote about these *three* Advents.

"We know that the coming of the Lord is threefold," he preached.

*"The first coming was in flesh and weakness,
the middle coming is in SPIRIT and power,
and the final coming will be in glory and majesty."*

The MIDDLE Advent is
all about God coming into our lives—now.

In this "middle," or Second, Advent, God comes to us *today*,
in the lives we have, a kind of *inner Advent*.

"If you wish to meet God," Bernard said, *"go as far as your own heart."*

Thomas Merton, a monk who was profoundly influenced by St. Bernard,
wrote about this Second Advent, saying,

*"The second is in a certain sense the most important for us...
The "Second Advent" by which Christ is present in our souls now,
depends on our recognition of...the passage of Christ through our world,
and through our OWN lives.*

Meditation on the *first Advent* gives us hope in the promise of Jesus' birth.
The remembrance of the *third* reminds us to await the fulfillment of that promise.

And the *second Advent, the middle, in between time*,
is a time when we remember that **God is near.**

God is here.

God dwells within us.

And that we can celebrate during Advent!

Diana Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: A Beautiful Advent*, blogpost, December 3, 2023.

How can YOU prepare for this middle Advent?

For who Jesus is and what He does in our lives?

Do you remember how **Jesus identified himself**,
when John asked ‘**are YOU the one, or shall we wait for another?**’....
Jesu said, tell him, *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them. "*

In other words--Jesus is a Savior who brings comfort, and peace.

He showed that in all of his ministry.

This is the same Savior who lives in our hearts today,
through the Holy Spirit.

The one John describes in his Gospel

as our Advocate, our Counselor, and **our Comforter.**

But I wonder, do you think of God that way?

As a **God of comfort?**

Paul says in **2 Corinthians 1:3-4:**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of mercies and the **God of all comfort**,⁴ who **comforts** us in all our
affliction, so that we may be able to **comfort** those who are in any affliction with
the **comfort** with which we ourselves are **comforted** by God.*

⁵ *For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us,
so also our **comfort** is abundant through Christ.*

God’s comfort is for us—TODAY.

But it is also the comfort we will know **in the end of time.**

Because we are not just waiting on Christmas,

We are waiting for Jesus **to come back.**

And make all things new,

And wipe away every tear,

And restore everything that is broken!

That gives me hope, what about you?

And we wait in between the two arrivals of Jesus,
We have the *power of the Holy Spirit* at work in our lives—Today, Right Now.

And we need that.

Because Christmas isn't easy.

It is a *wonderful time of year for Christians.*

And yet at the same time it is the *hardest* time of year.

Christmas is a *reminder* of all our hurts and sorrows.

It is a time when we are keenly aware of everything that's *wrong* in our world,
Because we are so encouraged to celebrate everything with singing, and
decorating, and gifting.

But at Christmas we are *missing* those who are sick,

And *grieving* those who have passed away.

We have broken relationships, broken families, and broken hearts.

The truth is, we can all use God's *comfort* at Christmas!

With that comfort, *we can celebrate the birth* of Jesus.

Somewhere in the middle of our brokenness.

We can remember a night long ago,

When a tiny baby was born who would take our brokenness and make us whole....

Don't you need that good news?

In the *middle of your sorrow*?

In the middle of the chaos of Christmastime?

I believe we all need God's comfort.

We all need *Christmas hope and peace*—something more powerful than any
cards, gifts, dinners, or gatherings.

Something that can sustain us,

and carry us through the darkest times.

For these ARE dark times.

And when we receive God's comfort—

It's not just something for ourselves.

What if God's comfort is meant to be *received, and passed on* to those around us?

What if it's something we can *share with others*?

Wouldn't that be the *best Christmas gift we could ever give*?

And don't we all want Christmas to be about MORE than just us?

Isn't this why we adopt needy families,

And support the Food Pantry?

We all want Christmas hope, love, joy, and peace to be **BIGGER than us, right?**

The good news is---our God comforts us.....

So we can comfort one another!

For God has promised comfort and peace—through the *prophets*,
and through the *Son*, our Savior Jesus Christ.

It is the very **COMFORT** that can carry us through the darkest times,
Even at Christmas.

Especially at Christmas.

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel*:

May we look for, and *receive* God's comfort and peace,

And *pass it on* this Christmas.

And all God's people can say together, Amen.