

Isaiah 40:1-5 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak 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. ³A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The Uncomfortable Work of Comforting

There are two sides to just about everything. If you look at one side you see tails and if you flip the coin over you see heads. That includes the Gospel we proclaim. One "side" of the Gospel has to do with something very comforting. God speaks tenderly to each one of us. He doesn't shout at us. He whispers in our ear and we hear welcomed news. "Your hard service is completed; your sins have been covered." For any sinner that's a comforting word—do you agree?

But then there is the other side of the Gospel. It's the side that reminds us of the great cost the Father required from his Son in payment for our sins. It's the side that warns us against "cheap grace." It also reminds us that as we readily acquire God's comforting Word, we hear a call to bring others this same comfort and encouragement.

The "other side" of the Gospel acquaints us with the untidy, uncomfortable aspect of the Christian enterprise. It is sort of like being told to go another way. You are in a familiar way of life and then you are shifted and made to go another direction. That way is not so familiar or well known to you. The way is difficult to learn. Of course, once that work is over and we are enjoying the new way, we've forgotten the discomfort, and we relish the comfort of it all.

Sometimes we miss this challenging aspect behind the famous Advent prophesy here in Isaiah 40: **In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness 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.** In between those lines are you able to hear the air hammers and bulldozers? Did you cough in the dusty air or notice your newly polished garments stuck in the mud? Bringing comfort has its uncomfortable side because it's heavy construction. Are we up to the challenge this Advent season?

The Advent hymn before us today presents us with the spiritual discomfort involved in receiving the Advent message of comfort. The hymn “Comfort, Comfort, Ye My People” is the work of a German preacher and chaplain, Johann Olearius. He originally wrote this based on Isaiah 40. In the third stanza the writer speaks about Advent, “calling sinners to repentance.” And also lifts his finger “O that warning cry obey.”

That hymn brings out Isaiah’s picture of dismantling and uprooting and leveling, these phrases of the hymn present us with an essentially discomfoting task. God tells us to despair of our own power, our own spiritual devices, our own clearing conceived plans about saving ourselves—with empty hands and an empty heart, we humbly wait for the true word of comfort God whispers to us: “Hard service has been completed. Your sin has been paid for.” Yes, there’s something that puts us all in an uncomfortable position when we have to admit that we human beings are weak—even powerless. We need a healing and mending within that we ourselves can never provide. It’s tough to admit, “I can’t do it myself.” Few things in life make us prideful human beings feel more uncomfortable.

Advent sweeps away all our pride. Although it may make us uncomfortable, God says to us, “Your hard service has been completed, that your sin has been paid for. You have received from the LORD’s hand double for all your sins. Not by you, but by a Savior: my Son. Although you struggle with your sins and falling into temptation, he steadily walked to the cross and paid the price—the full cost—for your sinful ways. Through his agonizing crucifixion and death, your sins are paid.”

In Holy Baptism, we die to sins with Christ, and then rise with him to new life. We become a new creation. This amazing salvation message of Advent—and of Christmas and of Lent and of Easter—moves you and me into the spiritual comfort zone. What comfort indeed.

Because of this message of salvation, we are pressed to speak about the uncomfortable work of comforting others. The other side of the message becomes explicit during the emerging Christmas season. The heart of this side of the message goes something like this: You become a child who has just seen the most incredible event. You have seen the Savior who died and is now back to life. That message received by your childlike ears and eyes leads to a childlike excitement that leads to a childlike voice. It was amazing. I heard about this man who died and then he rose. And his name is Jesus and he’s like the best hero ever. He saved me and he saved you. Faith brings that kind of excitement that won’t be held back. Now you and I are called to

bring comfort to those around us! No receiving comfort without sharing comfort. It's another way of saying that love generates love; faith yields fruit; and the Christmas Gospel leads to the Christmas spirit—sharing and caring. Proclaiming God's comfort can be uncomfortable but can be just as easy as giving an offering or donating food.

The coming Christmas season with its warmth and love is a paradigm of the way in which the people of God are to go about bringing comfort—day by day—to the broken, the poor, the needy, the dying, the ill, and all who suffer from injustice and the injurious pride of others. Each person on this earth falls into one of those categories. Even you! Advent prophets like Isaiah call us constantly to be engaged in the activity of comforting through human care.

In other places Isaiah sings about the eyes of the blind being opened and the ears of the deaf being unstopped. He talks about the poor and thirsty and needy being satisfied. He is talking about a Savior who does such things and about those people of the Savior who do likewise. He is talking about our common activity of bringing comfort to one another.

Now, bringing the comfort can be hard work. That's the other side of the Gospel, sharing. Comforting others can be uncomfortable for us who are called to do it! It's similar to being inconvenienced for a while when your normal ways are interrupted.

The scenarios in our Christian life develop like this: A woman is quite sick. She needs the kind of comfort we are talking about. She would be happy if any of our church members were to visit her. But potential comforters beg off, saying, "I feel uncomfortable around sick people; I never know what to say; that's why we have a pastor, he should go."

Another scenario involves the elderly—such as those who can't get out of their homes and sit much of the time in aloneness. But potential visitors beg off, saying, "I feel uncomfortable around old people; besides, nursing homes make me feel depressed."

Then there is the troubled soul, known to many in the congregation, facing a life's problem. Just a little word of encouragement from any one of you could make such a difference. But potential encouragers beg off, saying, "I couldn't possibly do that! You see, I have an unwritten rule about never stepping up and helping in other people's problems."

Or how about the new family that just moved in. Any of you could also give them such a welcome by just stopping by their house and saying, “Hi, I’m glad you are in the area. I have this church I attend that I would like to invite you to. There I get to hear the greatest news of all about how God comforts me along all of life’s courses.” But most beg off, saying, “If I’d do something like that, my friends—and probably the newcomer too—would think I was some kind of religious nut. That would make me feel uncomfortable.”

These are the hard parts of Jesus’ gospel call to spread his comfort because they each tell you to stop being you the sinner and instead to be ready to be uncomfortable yourself and get out there and share. Yes, that’s right God in his Word calls you to stop thinking about yourself and what you like so much. So what if you are called a religious nut. Aren’t you one already? If you don’t see yourself carrying your faith for everyone to see, the biggest problem you face is still you.

Bringing comfort to the hurting, broken people is rarely comfortable—or convenient, or something done quickly or easily. But it is that other side of the Gospel—our response to the comforting news of salvation in the cross of Jesus Christ. It is particularly the call during this Advent season. Do the uncomfortable work of comforting, and you will become a partner with Christ himself as he carries out his ministry of love in the world today through you.