

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben on Isaiah 40:1-11 at Victory of the Lamb on December 10, 2017.

**Series: What The World Needs Now**  
**Today's Focus: Humility**

**“The LORD’s Long-Range Comfort—See It Clearly!”**

- 1. He flexes his arm with limitless power**
- 2. He shepherds his flock with tender love**

Dear Lord, breathe on us your life-giving Spirit through the faithful promises of your Word. We are so frail and flighty. Renew our strength. Kindle in our hearts the fire of your love for you are ever-faithful. Amen.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, I begged my parents to buy me a Nintendo. Not a Nintendo Switch. The original NES. Instead of the Nintendo, however, that Christmas I got... a telescope. And, while disappointed after not finding a Nintendo under the tree, I remember getting out the telescope and hoping for the best.

So I set it up on its tripod stand. I went outside at night. I pointed it up at the moon. (Good place to start. Can't miss the moon, right?) But there was a problem. Everything was blurry. No matter how I adjusted the knobs, it just stayed blurry. I never could see anything clearly through it. It was only years later as a teenager that I learned my dad had gotten it at a garage sale and so after I took it apart I discovered that whoever had owned it before had switched around the lenses inside so that some of them were backwards. Have you ever tried looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars? That's kind of what was going on with my telescope. I wanted long-range clarity. I hoped to see the moon and the stars up close, but I couldn't see anything clearly...not even what was right in front of my face.

Sometimes we all have this problem, don't we? We see things in life a little fuzzy or we don't see clearly perhaps what others think we should be seeing clear as day, right? How many of you have a loved one or friend where it seems obvious to you that what they are doing is foolish or destructive but they seem arrogantly oblivious to it? Just as bad is when we're the arrogant ones who think we're seeing things clearly, when from God's perspective we're actually looking at something completely backwards. Could that ever happen to you or me?

That's what happened to the people of Isaiah's day. Instead of depending on the LORD their God to lead them and take care of them, they thought they were being smart by forming political alliances with other world super powers. Whoever seemed to be flexing their military muscles is who Israel's leaders were looking to for protection instead of looking to the LORD. Instead of praying to the LORD their God and trusting his protection plan, the people were praying to idols made of wood and stone. Instead of listening to the LORD's prophets and their sermons, the people carefully filtered out only those messages they wanted to hear (and this was before social media made it even easier to do that!). You ever filter out only the parts of the sermon you want to hear? So the people of Israel and Judah weren't seeing things clearly at all. They didn't want to hear what prophets like Isaiah had to say overall.

And so, sadly, the people were going to find out just how powerless they were apart from the LORD. Even good King Hezekiah fell into the trap and thought, “Maybe the Babylonians would be good friends for us. Hey guys, come on in. Check out all our treasures and all the cool stuff we have in our weapons

arsenal. Sure, spiritually you Babylonians are pagan idol worshippers, but militarily we'd make a good team, don't you think?" Except now the Babylonians were going to be coming as their enemies to plunder them as divine punishment for their lack of long-range trust in the LORD. Nebuchadnezzar was going to come and destroy Jerusalem, demolish the LORD's temple, murder thousands and carry many away into exile. You can imagine how bitter of an experience this would be for the people—where some hard, hard lessons were going to be impressed on them.

And the thing is that's always true with sin. You might think, "This is gonna be sweet. A little verbal zinger. A little false rumor. A little manipulative lie. Just a little peek. A little alliance with sin. We'll just do a little dance with the devil but we won't get too close." But in the end, friends, unchecked and unrepented sin will bring bitter and painful consequences. Ultimately, in the end, the day of God's retribution is coming. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians would be just a long-range picture of how horrible that final destruction will be for those for reject God. The words of Isaiah today are a warning of that also for us.

And yet in the midst of those suffering the exile in Babylon, there was something Isaiah wanted the people to see clearly—the LORD's long-range comfort! That's what the biblical text before us today is all about: **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> 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.**

What's the word right up front that gets repeated? *Comfort*. In the Hebrew language, repetition is one way of driving home a point. Comfort is the theme of Isaiah's sermon to an exiled people who would be experiencing bitter suffering and shame. Now think about it. What they deserved to hear was a harsh rebuke from God like, "You're getting what you deserve. Serves y'all right." Instead, God told Isaiah, "Preach a sermon. And here's your theme, *Maximum comfort*. Speak tenderly to my people. Tell them that I'm still your God. I haven't forgotten about you. Despite your unfaithfulness to the covenant I'm going to be faithful to my promise of sending a Savior. Tell them I'm going to cut short your suffering in exile. Tell them that their penalty for your sins is going to be paid. Let them know that where their sin increased, my grace has increased all the more. Isaiah, tell them, "No matter what the circumstances, I am going to carry out my promises. My relationship with you hasn't changed even when at times it may look like."

If you were a Jewish exile in Babylon, laid low and humbled—tasting the bitter consequences of your sin and that of your nation's political and spiritual leaders...this message sounds really, really sweet, doesn't it? Well do you realize, friends, that this is also God's message to you and me who by nature are spiritually exiled away from God and separated further by the vast desert of our sins? "No matter what circumstances you find yourself in, I am going to carry out my promises. My relationship with you hasn't changed even when at times it may look like it." Of course this comfort only sounds sweet to those whose hearts are ready to receive it. That's why the next part of Isaiah's message says,

**<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. <sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

Do these words sound familiar? It's because these are the timeless words of every true prophet of the LORD—from Isaiah to John the Baptist to every faithful preacher today. *Repent!* Now, Christmas is just around the corner. 2 weeks away. And if you're like me you've only gotten a few of your Christmas preparations done. But there's still a ton to do. Maybe you've got the tree up but you haven't put any lights on the house. That's on my to-do list. What's on yours? Well don't forget priority #1: **"Prepare the way for the LORD."** The most important Christmas preparation needs to be in your heart. Clear out the obstacles. Get rid of the clutter. Straighten out your crooked thinking. Friends, what aren't you seeing clearly that your Christian friends see clear as day in your life? Is it your stubbornness about a sinful habit? Is it the double standard you live by? Is it your biting sarcasm? Is it your selfishness? Is it work-a-holic-ness? Is it your passive aggressiveness? Is it your self-righteousness—"Don't you dare point out my sins even though I'm pretty, pretty good at pointing out others!" Whatever it is, now is the time God wants to clear out the sinful clutter in your heart. Prepare the way for the LORD Jesus...

**<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."**

In case you or I still manage to think, "You know, I'm kind of a big deal. The commercials on TV tell me how much I deserve all kinds of stuff because I've earned it. And hey, I must be a good pastor. Shoot, other churches want me to be their pastor" ... in case you or I still manage to think like this, God's Word here should help us see ourselves clearly. What are we like in and of ourselves? Like grass. Like flowers. I mean how are those flowers doing right now out in your yard that you planted like 6 months ago? They've wilted away, right? They're gone. Their beauty, their glory, their ability to inspire...all gone. Just like that too, right? Just like this week we had 60 degree balmy weather and overnight Monday into Tuesday the wind came rushing in and winter has arrived. We are like this too. Our personalities, our accomplishments, all the special characteristics we mortal humans can have and show in our lives are fragile and short-lived apart from God. It all blows away.

**<sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.** 3 years ago when we celebrated our groundbreaking here, we placed prayer rocks in a pile. Anyone remember that? We had a pile of rocks and a pile of sharpie markers and everyone got to write prayers on the rocks that later got placed into the foundation of this building. Well there was one rock that I actually got to put right here beneath this very spot where I'm standing. You know what it said? **The Word of our God endures forever.** Why? Because messengers of the Word come and go. Even faithful messengers like Isaiah fade away and are mostly forgotten. John the Baptist...he got beheaded. **But the word of our God endures forever.** And why is this truth so important to see clearly? Because this provides the LORD's long-range comfort. What is this word that endures forever? Remember the first verse of Isaiah's message: **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.** The gospel endures forever. Christmas is coming because Christ has come! The good news of God's gift of a Savior. Comfort that you and I have a relationship with God based not on our preparations or our personalities or our performance but on God's promises fulfilled in Jesus.

**<sup>9</sup> 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!" <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.**

The LORD's long-range comfort—do you see it clearly yet? There are two parts to this I want you to see because they describe who Jesus is and what he is like. Take this to heart. Jesus is a mighty king. He is also a gentle shepherd. Verse 10 calls him *the Sovereign LORD*. What does this mean? *Sovereign* is a word that means he's in control. He's in control of everything and because he is the LORD he promises to work out everything for the good of his people who call on his name. **See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.** This is picture language to describe his limitless power. Picture the strongest warrior you can think of. Jesus flexes his arm with limitless power. And he does this on behalf on his church. Even now. And this means in the end he will right all wrongs. He will comfort those who mourn. He will flip the script on who the real winners and losers are in this world where it so often looks like the wicked are the ones who prosper. But those who think they're first shall be last and the last shall be first. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled but those who humble themselves in repentance will be exalted. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

In the meantime....until the end of time, **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.**

It's a beautiful thing that we have a number of nursing moms in our church who are taking care of little ones—little babies who seem so small, so fragile, so needy sometimes. And so the picture that Isaiah paints for us here is that our dear Savior Jesus is like a shepherd who gently shepherds his flock with tender love. We're all like little nursing lambs, or we're like those nursing ewe sheep—those moms—who can't be driven hard. We're so frail and fragile. We're weak and sinful. But as our Good Shepherd Jesus displays extraordinary patience toward our sinful weaknesses. He sees clearly our many and constant needs and cares for us with tender love even though he is also the most powerful King.

Just think—the God of limitless power is also the God of tender love! Who else is like our dear Savior Jesus? He is the God of angel armies who did not exercise his limitless power for his own advantage but who humbled himself to take on our frail human flesh and blood and carry our sorrows. He put down his royal scepter and laid down his life as our Good Shepherd to take our place on the cross to suffer the consequences of our sins. I mean Pastor Bill and I genuinely and honestly love you. We are privileged to be your pastors—your earthly shepherds. But we are not your Saviors. We did not and could not die to take away your sins, conquer death, and write your names in the book of life. We did not love you from all eternity, give you spiritual rebirth through baptism into our names, or provide you a miraculous meal that gives you a foretaste of heaven in the Lord's Supper. That is and always will be only the Sovereign LORD himself—Jesus Christ, our dear Savior.

Friends, see clearly the LORD's long-range comfort! As the King of kings he flexes his arm with limitless power. He also shepherds his flock with tender, patient love. This love, his love, like his word, endures forever. **Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.** It's what the world needs now, more than ever. Amen.