

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

The Advent Spirit

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. ⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." ⁹ You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings 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!" ¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. ¹¹ 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.

Have you caught the Christmas spirit yet? Have you trimmed the Christmas tree in your house? Are you eagerly looking forward to another Christmas morning? Do you walk down the street and feel like bursting into a chorus of "Jingle Bells?" Or is just the opposite true? Is Christmas something you are not looking forward to at all? For many people, Christmas is not a good time of the year. They see all the people who are happy and joyful and it only makes them more depressed. Wherever you are on this spectrum—whether you are filled with joy or whether you are down in the dumps—God has a message for you today. It's the message the spoke to the hearts of his people some 2500 years ago and it speaks to our hearts today. As we look at Isaiah's prophecy, we pray that God will fill us all with *The Advent Spirit*.

It is very appropriate to turn to Isaiah's prophecy during the time of Advent, because Isaiah spoke a lot about preparation for God's people. The first 39 chapters of his book prepare the people for God's judgment as they are going to be taken away into exile in Babylon. The second half of Isaiah's book is a different kind of preparation. In order to truly appreciate his words, you have to put yourself in the sandals of an Israelite living in exile in Babylon. You haven't heard much in the way of good news lately. You keep getting reports of the awful things that are happening back in your homeland of Israel. You don't have much to look forward to this year...just another year of living in a foreign country at the mercy of wicked, foreign rulers. Even worse, you know it is your own fault that you are living in exile. You turned your back on the God who had always been there for you. You turned to the gods of the nations living around you and they did nothing for you. You are left without hope for a better future.

Now I pray that none of you came to church with such a hopeless feeling this morning, but I know that it is certainly a possibility. There may be some of you who aren't looking forward to Christmas and the turning of the year. It might be a reminder for you of the failures of the year that has gone by. Maybe you didn't accomplish all the goals you had in mind for 2008. Maybe 2008 was a very difficult year for you. Perhaps you lost a loved one and there spot will be empty at the Christmas dinner table. Maybe you have suffered personal hardships—physical or emotional. There may be other reasons that you are either not looking forward to the New Year or fearful of what it might bring. If that is at all a picture of what you are thinking or feeling today, listen to what God told his prophet Isaiah to speak to you. He said: נַחֲמוּ נַחֲמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: .

Those words might not mean a whole lot to you, but if you were Jew living in Babylon you certainly would have rejoiced at hearing them. *“Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.”* Those words were just the words that the Israelites needed to hear. They needed to know that God still cared about them and the he was still their God. In spite of their sinfulness he still reached out to them with a message of comfort. And here is the message: *“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.”* Even though they were now living in exile, God wanted them to know that their exile would not last forever. Their hard service was coming to an end. And even better than that, Isaiah proclaimed that their sins had been

paid for and, instead of God's punishment, they would receive grace upon grace.

You can leave here today with the same comfort from God's Word. You can leave here today knowing: "It's going to be OK. God has a good plan for you." He has already shown just how good his plan is by sending his Son Jesus into this world. It's unfortunate so many people feel bad around Christmas time when we realize that Christmas is really a celebration of the birth of the One person who can actually bring an end to suffering and pain—Jesus Christ. He came to pay for sin and to remove guilt. He came to bring a hope and future to all who put their trust in him. Because of Jesus, you can be assured that you will receive blessing upon blessing and not God's judgment.

Knowing that Jesus was coming into this world, the Lord wanted Isaiah to tell the people to get ready: *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. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken* Now was not the time for the people to mope around in grief or to continue along a path of sin and rebellion. Now was the time to prepare their hearts and their lives for God's gracious appearance.

These verses really sum up the Advent spirit. It is a time of preparation. It begins with the comfort of knowing that God is coming with his love and grace. But it also involves Spirit-worked repentance and preparation on our part. What are we doing during this Advent season to truly get us ready for the joyful appearance of the Christ-child at Christmas. Now is the time to examine our hearts and lives and realize there are rough and rugged places that we can smooth out. There are sins that we can leave behind us. There are habits that can stop being habits. There are also some valleys that we can fill in. There are things we aren't doing or have stopped doing which we could do again. Advent is a great time to reconnect with regular Bible study and prayer. This kind of preparation is what it truly means to catch the Advent spirit.

It all centers around the Word of God. And Isaiah lets us know that this is exactly how it should be. After all, "*All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.⁷ The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.⁸ The*

grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” It is only by the Word of God that we can truly be filled with the Spirit of Advent. It is God’s Word that convicts us of sinfulness and gives us repentant hearts. It is God’s Word that brings us the comforting message of the gospel that lets us know that we can have hope and can look forward to a future filled with God’s grace.

Maybe you are the type of person that loves to be filled with the Christmas spirit. Maybe you are the type of person that feels more like saying “bah-humbug” to all the hoopla surrounding the holidays. Either way, I hope that you can realize that there is a profound spiritual message God wants you to hear at this time of the year and all year long. As Isaiah brought a message of hope to the exiles so long ago, God wants you to have hope today. Advent is a time of looking forward. We look forward to celebrating Christ’s coming in the manger of Bethlehem. We also look forward to the day when Christ will come again in glory. Let’s truly catch the Spirit of Advent this year and prepare ourselves spiritually for these upcoming celebrations, knowing that our God has made it possible for us to have hope and peace this Christmas and into the New Year. **Amen.**

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