

December 7, 2014

Isaiah 40:1-1

“Who Needs Comfort?”

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A big burly man walks through the aisles of a grocery store. In his shopping cart is a whimpering, whining little three-year-old boy. As they walk, the man speaks very quietly, in a calming, comforting voice, “Take it easy, Billy. Don’t cry, Billy. Everything’s going to be OK, Billy. Don’t freak out, Billy.” An older woman stops the man, and compliments him. “I just think you’re a wonderful dad. It’s so sweet how you’re helping little Billy keep his cool.” The man just looks at her and says, “Actually, his name is Jimmy. I’m Billy.”

Billy was stressed, under pressure, feeling the strain; and he needed someone to comfort him. I think, at times, we all need that. Our world is so full of danger and hardship. Our culture is so fast-paced and demanding. Our home life can be so tension-filled and draining. Our bodies wear out. Our minds lose their sharpness. Our spirits struggle.

Who needs comfort? Not just Billy, the stressed-out dad in the grocery store. All kinds of people in the world today – and all kinds of people right here in this room -- have a desperate, crying need for comfort.

Who needs comfort? Spouses in stale, unfulfilling marriages ... singles searching for soul mates ... family members estranged from each other ... kids whose parents have split up ... people who’ve lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost their health, or lost their hope ... people whose kids or spouses are deployed overseas ... people afraid of deadly diseases ... people in our nation at odds over racial issues and legal decisions ... people burdened with their addictions ... people

just like us burdened with our guilt, lost in our sin, or fallen away from our God.

Our world is filled with people who need comfort, consolation, reassurance, relief.

Several hundred years before Christ was born, the Old Testament people of God – the children of Israel – were a people in need of comfort, too. They had been blessed, privileged, and chosen by God. He had fed them, fought for them, and provided for them in miraculous ways. But, over the years, the Israelites fell out of love with God, and fell farther and farther away from his grace. He warned them, pleaded with them, gave them second chance after second chance; but they turned away from God. They strayed, they wanted to be self-sufficient, and in the end they suffered for it. Their enemies picked them apart, invaded their territory, and destroyed their nation; but Israel's destruction, truly, was self-inflicted.

This is the setting, friends, for God's message. What does God say, to his people centuries ago, who are stressed, broken, and desperate? What does the Lord God say, to his people today, who are struggling, burdened, losing heart?

Read those words again with me, please. *“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”*

God's message for his suffering people? Not more judgment, not further punishment; but comfort. He says it twice, *“Comfort, comfort my people”* – and the repetition gives emphasis to God's message. He wasn't ignoring their sins, or making light of their rebellion. They had been wounded and terrified by God's messages of Law; but now, to these

empty, broken, leaking vessels, comes a message of grace. God's plan was to heal their wounds and fill them up with sweet, soothing grace.

"Comfort, comfort my people," God commands the prophet. Had the nation repented of their sins, and changed their ways? We don't know. All we know is that God's heart was bigger than the hurt his people had caused him. He sends a message of comfort to them: "Your warfare is over! Your sins are forgiven, and you'll be abundantly blessed!"

It's as if God has his people in his shopping cart, and he's saying to them – not to himself – "Take it easy, _____. Don't cry, _____. Everything's going to be OK, _____. Don't freak out, _____." These words paint a beautiful picture, from days long ago; but they speak to us of a God who cares and provides for us, a God who comforts us in all our sorrow and struggles, too.

But how does God's comfort come? When will we see it? How shall it arrive, in our lives? Will our problems suddenly disappear when we pray? Will our heartaches just magically turn to rewards one day, and our stresses suddenly become joys? That's not what God was really promising to Israel back in the day, and it's not what God promises us, either.

Isaiah's words of comfort for Israel were words that pointed them to God's coming salvation. True comfort comes not from restored national pride. The comfort we really need comes not from perfect health, or perfect marriages, or perfect parenting techniques. God's comfort comes in the speaking of words that will fall upon the heart with pleasure and refreshment, like gentle rain falling upon and renewing the ground. God's comfort came in the message proclaimed of a Savior who was coming.

“Prepare the way of the Lord,” Isaiah shouted out. “The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together ... Behold, the Lord God comes ... behold, his reward is with him ... he will tend his flock like a shepherd, and gently lead those that are with young.”

Isaiah’s words pointed ahead to Christ Jesus, didn’t they? For isn’t knowing Christ Jesus the greatest comfort of all?

The Israelites back then had the promise; but they still had to wait and watch. But, for us here today, the promise has been fulfilled! The Savior has come! Our world is still a hard, scary place. Our nation, just like Israel, has its share of serious troubles and sad failings. But Jesus has been born, and we know him! God’s salvation has been come, and been made known to us!

And what better comfort could there be than to know that you’re forgiven and accepted by God today? No matter what else is going on in your life or in your world, you can know – not just wonder, not just hope, but know – that God loves you! You can be sure he’s on your side! You can be absolutely certain that no sickness, no sorrow, no suffering, and nothing that the world can ever throw at you will separate you from your loving God!

Christ came to gather his lost sheep – even you! Christ came to give his life for a world of sinners – even you! And Christ came so that his grace would make you and me to be saved, to be blessed, to be victorious children of God!

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Today these words point us to the best comfort of all: Jesus Christ.

Who needs that comfort? (*raise hand*). Here is comfort for you (*point to cross*). Here is comfort (*point to communion altar*). Here is comfort for you, in Christ (*hold up Bible*).
Amen.