

SERMON SERIES

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COMFORT MY PEOPLE

Isaiah 39&40

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Our communities in the Hills are full of people in need of comfort. But they often don't get it because too many others are getting comfortable. Obviously, I am making a play on the word 'comfort'. I'm doing that to make clear what Isaiah means when he speaks of 'comfort'. The word 'comfort' means to 'bring relief from distress, to bring consolation, to be a help or support'. The word comes from the Latin 'com' meaning 'with' and 'forte' which means 'strength'. In other words, it means to be with some one to provide strength to cope. Comfort is found in that hug and reassurance when the pain is too deep for words. Comfort is found when in your depression some one says 'I know how you feel. I've been there and come through it.' Comfort is given when an underprivileged group can find its own place in the community. Comfort is found when some one brings the assurance of God; that God forgives and cares. The other way of using the word 'comfortable' can be to describe someone living in ease. Someone relaxing with a drink, maybe a glass of 'Southern Comfort'. They sit back and say 'This is the life. This is comfort.' You see the difference? Many people need comfort. But often others have no time for them because they are too busy getting comfortable. So often in the mad rush to keep up with our jobs and earn the money for all the things we want, we have no time to talk, to be, to share. Or if we ourselves need comfort we often try to meet that need by striving to be comfortable. In other words, we bury our insecurity and fears with our pleasures and possessions. Materialism is the god that fills the emptiness in our lives. We live in a society that is the most well off, the most comfortable in history. Yet at the same time we have a massive problem. So many people feel their lives lack purpose and meaning. Depression is rife. Our culture has a huge problem with alcohol and drug use. Not only because we don't know how else to party, but to dull a deep underlying sense of despair.

Our days are just like those of Judah in the time of King Hezekiah. The people were very comfortable with their fine houses and their vineyards. In chapter 5:9 Isaiah describes the "fine mansions, the great houses" they have, with large vineyards so they can make plenty of good wine. He says (5:11) "They get up early in the morning to run after their drinks [and] stay up late at night until they are inflamed with wine... (5:22) They are

heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks.” Isn’t that interesting language? It’s like our culture that makes you a hero because you can hold large amounts of alcohol? Isaiah also points out that (5:12) “They have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine- but they have no regard for the deeds of the Lord, no respect for the work of his hands.” The people are very comfortable and are having a good time of it. But, says Isaiah, no one has time for the “poor, the widow, the fatherless.” No one gives comfort to those who suffer; no one really cares for the other. Now it wasn’t just the people who had this attitude. Their leadership did too. We read in chapter 39:2 that when the Babylonian envoys came, King Hezekiah “...showed them what was in his store houses- the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armoury and everything found in his treasures.” Instead of talking of the wonders of God, and praising him, Hezekiah showed off his riches.

But the comfortable lifestyle of the king and the people was about to be changed. Note Isaiah 39:5 “Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left says the Lord.” Israel had forgotten God. In all their pleasures and possessions, they lost sight of how God provided. They lost sight of the fact that they were his covenant people, called to be a “light to the nations”. So, Isaiah made it clear they would be sent in Exile to Babylon. God did that to have them come to their senses. In captivity they would not need to hear about pending judgment, because they would be living it. They would not need to be reminded of their sins; they would be experiencing the consequences every day. There is a sense in which still today we live with the consequences of our materialistic culture. Our society has little regard for God and his ways for life. In fact, the thought is we don’t need God, given all our personal wealth and entertainment. ‘I’m OK. I don’t have time to care about you’. Often people don’t even make time to listen to the cries of their own hearts. They don’t recognise the emptiness of their souls and they are suffering the consequences of that.

But you notice that the Word of God does not stop once it has pointed out the failures of a people. Immediately after Isaiah has been instructed to bring the word of judgement he is told to bring God’s word of hope and ‘comfort’. In chapter 40 we see an amazing shift. As captive slaves in Babylon they would not need Isaiah to shake the finger and say, ‘I told you so’. They needed to hear that God still cared for them and that there was hope. Look with me at Isaiah 40:1,2: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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”. It is quite amazing to hear the tenderness after the very

strong and disturbing words of chapter 39. Hear the passion as twice the word is repeated "Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly..." It is interesting that the Hebrew word Isaiah uses for "comfort" is also a word which can be translated "repent." The word is 'nâham', and its basic meaning has the idea of breathing deeply. It can therefore mean to breathe deeply with sorrow for your sin. Or to breathe deeply as you comfort and console someone. The idea is that God's comfort comes because of the people's repentance. Because they have breathed deeply in repentance, God has breathed deeply as he comforts them. God is so consoling because he says "...her hard service has been completed; her sin is paid for...she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sin." That last phrase "double for all her sin" does not mean that God punished the nation twice what their sins required. It is a reference to an eastern custom. If a man owed a debt he could not pay, his creditor would write the amount of the debt on a paper and nail it to the front door of his house. That way everyone passing would see that here was a man who had not paid off his debt. In a shame culture it was a powerful way to shame him into paying. But if someone paid the debt for him, then the creditor would double the paper over and nail it to the door as testimony that the debt had been fully paid. It is a beautiful picture of the Christ who would pay the price for sin. Isaiah hints at Jesus by prophesying that someone one is coming!

Look with me at Isaiah 40:3-5: "A voice of one calling: '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.'" With this beautiful imagery Isaiah prophesied that God was coming! God was coming to save them, and the call was going out to prepare his way. In ancient times, months before a king's entourage would set out on a journey, the call would go before him: 'Prepare the way for the king.' The officials and local people would be very busy to remove any obstacles and fill in the rough places in his path. They would build a road and fill in small valleys and dig through the hills, so the king's progress would be smooth and unhindered. Their reward was to see the king coming in all his royal splendour. In this passage, God is on his way to his people in slavery in a foreign nation. He will come to them and deliver them from captivity, bringing them home on the highway that has been prepared for him.

Now, prophecy is often multi-layered. The fulfilment of the prophecy was not only in God's people coming back to their land after the exile. John the Baptist quoted these same verses as being fulfilled by him. In John 1:23 he said, "I am the voice of one crying

in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'. John prepared the way for the coming of Jesus. It is in Jesus Christ, the Immanuel, 'God with us', that God has fulfilled the prophecy to come and redeem his people. It is through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus that God says, 'all is forgiven those who repent'. It is through Jesus that God comes into our lives. God not only forgives, when we come in repentance, but he begins to change us. By the Spirit we are challenged to prepare to make room in our lives for the king. "Every valley shall be lifted up". In the times you feel broken and defeated, there will be comfort and encouragement from the Lord. "Every mountain shall be made low". All those places where our ego rears its ugly head, our proud boasts, our grasping for wealth and power must be cut down to size. "The crooked places will be made straight". If we want to welcome the king into our lives, there is much sin that needs to be dealt with, lots of areas that need straightening out. So not only will God comfort us with forgiveness when we repent, and comfort us when we struggle. But he will disturb us in those areas we have grown comfortable in our selfishness and sin.

Isaiah says another voice cries out: note: 6-8 "A voice says 'Cry out'. And I said 'What shall I cry out?' 'All people are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are like grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the Lord stands forever." There is deep reassurance in these words. For God's people of Isaiah's time it was the reminder that even if Babylon seemed so all-conquering and powerful, that empire existed only by God's permission. When it would be time for Judah to be released from exile, God would see to it that they would simply walk away because the Babylonian empire had collapsed, crushed by the Persians. (Note Isaiah 40:23&24). We are reminded too that all the great things we boast about will fade away and disappear. All our knowledge and power will not save us. All that we have bought and built, all our materialism and pride will pass into nothing. "The grass withers and the flowers fall when the breath of the Lord blows upon it...but the Word of the Lord will stand forever." God's Word, his promises will last. At the end of time it will be Jesus who judges and determines all things. And we who repent and believe in him, will share in that glory.

Isaiah says in: 10&11 "See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense is with him. He tends his flock like a shepherd and gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who are young." There are two portraits of God here. There is the God who is the judge. He will deal finally with all injustice. All who failed to care for the vulnerable and weak, who abused and brutalised and robbed others for their own gain

with be dealt with. Justice is a key part of God's character and final purpose. Everyone will be answerable for what they did. No one will get away with what they did. All who have suffered and long for justice will get it. But God is also a shepherd. Those who repent and embrace him as Lord, God will nourish with tender care, even the weakest of believers. Often those who have been abused, those neglected and homeless can find it hard to believe. But God will be very tender with them. No greater comfort is there than this that God has personally dealt with that which causes all our suffering. To a world that groans under the consequences of its self-indulgence, God comes with his message of grace. Let us make sure as a church that this Advent this message of comfort is heard. In our own lives let's make sure we are not spending all our time and effort on getting comfortable. Please let us not pretend and bury our hurts and problems, our sin and failure with another buying spree and a drink of this or that. Let us be real about ourselves before God. Let us repent deeply and feel God's comfort, feel his grace. And at this time of Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, and everybody thinks of Christmas presents and record sales, please proclaim the message that the greatest gift has been given by God. It's a gift that brings true comfort and hope: his name is Jesus.