

**Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)**  
**Advent Midweek 3 – December 15, 2021**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11 – Jesus is Our Comfort**  
**By Vicar Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Hear again from the Old Testament reading for the third Sunday in Advent, from Isaiah chapter 40. **“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”** This is our text.

Last Wednesday I made a number of connections between last week’s text from Malachi 4 and the text two weeks ago from Jeremiah 23. We heard how both Malachi and Jeremiah mentioned a branch, both described the coming day of the Lord, both mentioned Moses, and both spoke of imputed righteousness in Christ. Today I’m going to make a couple more connections, pointing out how today’s text from Isaiah 40 and last week’s text from Malachi 4 both talk about John the Baptist, law and gospel, repentance and comfort. What’s more, if the theme two weeks ago was that Jesus is our righteous Branch, and if last week’s theme was that Jesus is our sun of righteousness, then the theme today is that Jesus is our comfort.

Last week we heard from the book of Malachi words of judgment and condemnation against the unrepentant. We heard that the day of the Lord is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. That day will be a day that sets them ablaze, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. For the repentant, last week’s text included a wonderful gospel promise that the sun of righteousness would rise with healing in his wings, but on the whole Malachi 4 was a warning of judgment and a call to repentance. And because it was a call to repentance, it spoke clearly about the new Elijah, John the Baptist, the Messiah’s forerunner who would turn fathers and children back to God, to prepare them in repentance for the great and awesome day of the Lord.

Like Malachi, today’s reading from Isaiah 40 is also about John the Baptist and his message. In fact, all four Gospel writers quote from Isaiah 40 when they introduce John the Baptist’s ministry. John even quoted Isaiah 40 when talking about himself, saying, **“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”**<sup>1</sup> It’s rare to find an Old Testament prophecy applied so specifically to a particular person in the New Testament. So as we examine Isaiah 40, we should keep in mind that this passage is all about John the Baptist.

But unlike Malachi, today’s reading from Isaiah 40 is not so much a call to repentance, not so much about law and judgment. Instead, it’s a proclamation of comfort and peace by the gospel. **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”** But Isaiah is giving John words to cry which sound unfamiliar on his lips. We don’t think of John as the one who proclaims comfort to God’s people. We don’t think of him as a herald of good news, lifting up his voice to cry that the Lord is coming not in wrath, but to tend his flock like a shepherd, to gather his lambs in his arms, to carry them in his bosom and gently lead them. In the New Testament, we never hear John the Baptist speaking tenderly to Jerusalem, crying to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned. Instead, we are used to hearing him say to the crowds, **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.”**<sup>2</sup> We are used to John crying, **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**<sup>3</sup>

That’s the law. John preached the law, because before our hearts can be ready for the gospel, we must come to repentance. When John called the people a brood of vipers, when he compared them to a fruitless tree about to be thrown in the fire, God was using John’s preaching of the law to turn the people’s hearts. John was reminding them of their mortality to show them their desperate need. He was echoing Isaiah’s words, **“All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.”**

<sup>1</sup> John 1:23

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:7-8

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:9

But Isaiah adds, **“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”** Despite our frailty, there is something firm that lasts, something which does not fade. We have Jesus, the Word made flesh. So John did follow up his preaching of law with the gospel, forgiveness through Jesus. As we heard last week, John’s father Zechariah foretold in his song praising God – which is called the Benedictus in our Matins liturgy – that John would preach the gospel, **“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”**<sup>4</sup> Knowledge of salvation, the forgiveness of sins. Tender mercy, light in the shadow of death, the way of peace. That’s pure gospel! That’s salvation by faith in Jesus, our sun of righteousness.

John preached the gospel by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. He preached the gospel by pointing to Jesus, crying, **“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”**<sup>5</sup> He pointed to Jesus, the one coming after him whose sandals he was unworthy even to untie.

So today, in Isaiah 40, we hear a prophecy of the kind of tender and comforting words that John the Baptist preached, words bringing knowledge of salvation, saving faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, gospel words that shine on us like new dawn, full of healing, radiance, and joy.

Isaiah writes, **“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.”** That’s comforting gospel, but it can still sound like law. Jerusalem has received double for all her sins. This remind us of Malachi’s day of wrath, burning like an oven. Double payback is heavy punishment. Double payback is harsh. Iniquity pardoned? More like iniquity paid in full, and then some! Our arrogant human nature might react to the gospel by saying, “Comfort? I don’t want your comfort. I don’t want your pity. You paid me back double, God. An apology would be more appropriate than empty words of comfort.”

You may be suffering pain in your life, you may feel God’s hand against you. You may think you’ve paid for your iniquity in full by what you’ve been through, but nothing you endure can pay for your sins. You are his people; he is your God. He sends you these trials in love, to turn you to repentance, so that your hearts may be opened to Jesus, to the gospel. You need Christ, the Lamb of God, who suffered double humiliation for you. Though he was the Son of God, he humbled himself and became man. And that was only his first humiliation. He also went to the cross to pay for your iniquity by his humiliating death. He is the one who received from the Lord’s hand double for all your sins, so that you might receive rich comfort, comfort that is not empty at all.

This is why we need to hear the law first, why we need preachers to bring us to fear God’s wrath before we can take comfort in Jesus. We must realize that we are a brood of vipers before we can ever appreciate that Jesus calls us lambs. Only then do we realize with tears that he is our good shepherd, who gathers us in his arms, who carries us in his bosom and gently leads us to green pastures. Only then are you comforted that even though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God has promised to lift up the valleys for you. He lifts up the valleys of your empty hearts by filling them with faith, sending the Holy Spirit to dwell in you.

Through the gospel, through the preaching of John the Baptist and all who proclaim the coming Christ, we have double comfort. God says it twice: **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”** In Jesus, you are doubly restored. Not only is your iniquity forgiven, but God also exalts you and makes you heirs of salvation. Not only has every valley been lifted up for you, but every mountain has also been made low – that is, not only are your empty hearts filled by Jesus, but the mountains of pride in your hearts are also removed to make room for him. In his double grace, God has prepared your way, to lead you into his heavenly kingdom on a smooth highway, so that you will not stumble, you will not fall away. And so Isaiah concludes in chapter 61, **“Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy.”**<sup>6</sup>

In the name of Jesus our comfort. Amen.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:76-79

<sup>5</sup> John 1:29

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 61:7