

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

So what does it for you? Most people can think of two or three things that make them feel completely calm, things that they value highly because they are very stress-relieving: a soothing massage, a whirlpool in the locker room after practice, a dip in the hot tub out on the ol' deck, or maybe it's a cup of tea and a good book that at least for a little while gets rid of the aches and pains and stress. For me it would be something more like this ♦ ...some trees, water with an optional boat and fishin' pole.

But if the Lord came up behind you today and set his fingers on your shoulders, would he find you all tense and tightened up with anxiety, guilt, shame or stress? Would you be worried that he would have some pretty good reasons to move his fingers a little north, from massaging your shoulders to wringing your neck? Good news is, he has no desire to do that. Instead of fingers on your shoulders, he uses words that pass through your ears and fill your mind and flood your heart. As no whirlpool, book, or even massage can do, his mere words remove every concern and every worry simply by what he tells you.

These are - ♦ Words of Comfort for the People of God...Words that relax your mind and relieve your stress and remove your guilt. ***Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and tell 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.*** In other words, double the grace. And as we consider these words of comfort, please...

I have to ask, how much stress do those words give you: ***Be perfect as I the Lord your God am perfect?*** The fact of the matter is, we have an astronomically better chance of finding the "perfect" gift for everyone on our Christmas list than we do of standing perfect before God. In fact, the bible tells us that already at conception we

are sinful...so, perfection lost. And we continue to sin and break God's commands every day. How much fuming anger, then, do you think there is in the heart of God because you and I are not "***perfect?***"

How comforting it is, then, to hear Jesus say, "***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened by God's imperative to be perfect or perish. I'll give you rest from that. Take upon you the very light load that I have to give you – my perfection as your very own.***" ...There now, doesn't that feel better? Words of comfort for the people of God – feel the anxiety and the stress and the worry over sin taking flight?

And there's more. Have you seen the new apartment / business complex – the MacMillan, as its called - going in on Rice St. and 694? Remember what it used to look like – the old strip mall, big trees and a couple of houses? ♦ Look at it now: all of the old laser-leveled flat – all of the buildings and most of the trees gone. Just a rising new structure, gentle grades so water runs off and lots of asphalt to handle the traffic.

You know, there's a magnificent king named Jesus who comes to his people. In preparation for his arrival there is to be built a flat, level road fit for a king. How much work does it take so that you and I are fit to welcome our King? Look at the MacMillan. The holes filled, the heights bulldozed, what's crooked made straight, what's rough made smooth. Now look inside *yourself*. Look at the change that was needed to welcome the King; the work required to prepare the way. What's sinful is sent away. What's rebellious is removed. Despair is filled in. Arrogance is eliminated. And hope built up.

What a massive undertaking to get someone like me and you ready to host someone like Jesus! But God did it. He overhauled us – filled the valleys and leveled the hills. Even this attitude of repentance in us that John proclaimed - this sincere sorrow over sin - is traced straight back to God. And what God has done for you and accomplished in you is uncovered for all to see – ***the glory of the LORD [has***

been] revealed, and all mankind together [has seen] it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken it - ♦ words of comfort for the people of God – words of comfort for you and me.

And don't we need it! You see, people like us need this comfort. We need something to take hold of, something that will last, because we certainly won't. As Isaiah describes, *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* Less than a week ago there was still bare grass on our lawns. Yet, unless I miss my guess, none of you were out cutting it one last time before the snow came... ♦ ...because it didn't look this. It was dead dry grass – hardly a picture of encouragement! But a picture all the same - a picture of us – here today, gone tomorrow. The here today part is “but by the grace of God.” The gone tomorrow part...well, that's because of our own sinfulness. As the Lord put it through Ezekiel: *The soul who sins is the one who will die.* (18:4,20)

And the only, one thing that will outlast us, the only thing that will *never perish, spoil, or fade* (1 Peter 1,4) is the promise of God: *The word of our God stands forever.* Jesus said it to the crowd that followed him to Capernaum after the miraculous feeding of the 5000 *"Whoever believes in me has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day."* (Jn 6:40) That statement will stand forever and it's the statement that allows you to actually outlast death, to live past it. ♦ What comfort for the people of God!

No wonder Christians are told to go tell it on the mountain, to get up on a high hill and shout it out: *Here is your God!* Just look at him – powerful enough to do anything he wants yet he makes sure to visit people like you and me. Oh, he has every right to visit on us the eternal misery we have coming yet he gives us a complete pardon, eternal life and eternal bliss instead. Look at him more closely and you'll see that the little lambs he

gathers...in his arms and carries ... close to his heart [and] he gently leads...they're not just the infants and toddlers. They're also the big, little kids like you and me.

Are you young and need constant attention, aging and need special care? Are you hurting and need healing, injured and need treatment, weak and need strength? Are you anxious and need peace, confused and need guidance, doubtful and need confidence? Are you guilty and need pardon? Are you ashamed and need assurance? Are you desperate and need the divine? My friend, Jesus knows you by name. You don't need to wait in waiting room to be seen. He's not in a hurry to move on to someone else. Whatever your need he has you covered, *because he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7) - words of comfort for the people of God, huh?

Comfort, comfort my people –says your God...*twice* even for emphasis. The hard, impossible work of having to be perfect – Jesus ended that for us by *being perfect* for us. The *rough* and *rugged* mountains and valleys of our sinful hearts – loved and leveled when Jesus bled and died. Let those words of comfort be the massaging fingers or the soothing hot tub or whatever it is that relaxes your soul and relieves your stress. Let your comfort be this: that your Savior knows you for who you are and calls you his own in the waters of Holy Baptism. Let your comfort be this: that your Savior has given his body broken for you and his blood shed for you – forgiveness straight from the source – in his Holy Supper. Let your comfort be this: that the eternal blessings and the eternal love of the eternal God are resting on you in his holy promise. This is *the Word of our God...[word of comfort]...and it stands forever.* Amen.