

Second Sunday in Advent

Oh Come Emmanuel: The Gift of Prophets

Isaiah 40:1-11

12/10/17

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

Isaiah 40:1-11

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

My mom always used to get me the same thing for Christmas. I didn't even have to see the rectangular department store clothing box wrapped under the tree to know what she would give me. Every year, from my first year of college until about five or six years ago, she always gave me a white dress shirt and a tie. Like I said, that was until about five or six years ago. Then I told her I had enough white shirts and ties and didn't really need any more – don't worry, I said it nicely, I didn't hurt her feelings or anything like that. Well, a couple years ago, I realized how nice it was to get that new white shirt every year. I noticed that the shirts I had were starting to look a little shabby, so at Christmas that year I told my mom it would be nice to get a new white shirt. It turns out, as the wife of a pastor herself, she knew I would always need new white dress shirts.

That's how it is sometimes, right? You get a gift you might not think you need or want, only to later realize how right and thoughtful and generous the person was in giving that gift. Hopefully, in the meantime, you didn't spurn the gift and get rid of it.

This Advent season, using the Old Testament lessons assigned for the Sundays, we have been looking at gifts God gives to prepare us for Jesus' coming. Advent looks forward to the ways Jesus came, comes, and will come to us again. Last Sunday really set the focus of the entire Advent season. We heard that when Jesus comes again on the Last Day, he comes both to destroy and to save. So that we aren't destroyed on that Last Day, Jesus told us to get ready, to watch and be prepared.

Baptism, as we saw, is a gift God gives to prepare us for Jesus' coming in judgment. Baptism prepares you by giving you the gift of faith, connecting you to Jesus, and washing your sins away. But the grace God gave you in Baptism, the faith God gave you in Baptism can be lost. No, God will never take his grace away, but we can throw it away.

To keep you from throwing his grace away, to keep you from discarding it like an unwanted and unappreciated gift, God gives you another gift – prophets. He brings people into your life to speak God's Word to you, to share both God's message of law and gospel.

The sermon text this morning is God's Words to one of his prophets, probably the most well-known of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah. Through Isaiah, God gives us the comfort and encouragement we need to remain strong in faith until the end. God gave Isaiah instructions at the beginning of this text, "**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem**".

God's words of comfort, however, come after a lot of uncomfortable things. This text is the beginning of the second half of Isaiah. In the first half of the book, the first 39 chapters, there isn't a whole lot of good news. The first half is filled with warnings of God's judgment. Even here, God reminded Isaiah's initial audience, and he reminds us all, where we stand in relation to him. "**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. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them.'**"

What do you suppose God's point is by comparing you, and all people, to grass? There is an old poem entitled "Ozymandias" about an ancient mighty king by that name. In the poem, a traveler comes upon a statue of Ozymandias. On the pedestal he reads the inscription, "*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!*" So he must be pretty great, pretty powerful... except that the statue in the poem is broken off at the waist. Ozymandias's kingdom, swallowed by the dessert. For all his self-thought might and majesty, Ozymandias was nothing.

"All men are like grass..." All of us want to consider ourselves important, and we want to do something important. Our history books record the events of human achievement. The monuments of the ages stand as testaments to great people. But what does God see, **"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field."**

No matter how great and glorious, no matter how numerous your achievements, no matter how highly others think of you, you are still like grass – here today, mown down in death tomorrow. That's a sobering thought, isn't it? Why does God bring up this reminder of mortality? Because your mortality is a reminder of your sin. Your sin is what causes your death. Your sin is what deserves God's wrath. Your sin is as inescapable as the grave.

Why would God bring this back up? I don't want to think about my mortality, I don't want to think of my sin! God brings it up because he loves you so much that before he can comfort you, he must first make you uncomfortable. He loves you so much that with his law, he crushes any thought that you are ok on your own, that your achievements and accomplishments can stand before God's judgment.

Think of God like a doctor. To help you, sometimes a doctor must first cause some pain. To remove the tumor may require a surgery to cut it out. God uses the scalpel of his law to show you your sin, so you recognize that without a Savior, you are no better off than Ozymandias.

Then, once God has brought you to your knees, once he has pulled away any self-reliance, any thought of boasting about accomplishments, once he has shown you your sin and the death and punishment you deserve – then, God brings his comfort. **"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."**

The comfort God gives is your freedom from the slavery to sin, death, and the devil. Your God has won your freedom by sending Jesus as your Savior. He lived a perfect life in your place to complete your hard service – to fulfill the demands the Law makes on you. He paid for your sin by giving his life in your place on the cross. He has given you a double portion of God's grace by washing you from all your sin in his blood.

You have the comfort of knowing that your worth and importance is not tied to this life, it isn't based on your wealth and achievements. Your worth and importance comes from the God of all creation who has given his all to rescue you from sin and now gives you heavenly riches beyond compare. God's message to you brings peace and comfort, it brings a patient longing for the heaven he has won for you.

How does God get that message to you – through messengers. **“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,”** God said. God communicates his message through human speech. He does not work through telepathy or inner illumination. He doesn’t come to you in dreams and visions – he could, he did, but that’s not how he chooses to work anymore. He communicates his thoughts to humans through human words expressed by human voices. He hasn’t promised to work any other way. Paul wrote to the Romans about the necessity of the messenger, **“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ”** (Romans 10:14,17).

And God has done that for you. Through messengers, prophets you can even call them, God has brought you to know his Word. He has brought you to recognize your sin, but most importantly he has brought you to know the comfort of his forgiving love. Think of all the people God has used in your life to bring his Word to you – pastors, teachers, parents, grandparents, neighbors, friends. God has given all those people to you to keep you close to him, to keep your faith – given to you at your Baptism – growing so that you are prepared for Jesus’ Advent – for Jesus’ return on the Last Day.

What a gift God gives to you! He gives you his Word and people who care about you so much that they speak God’s Word to you, that they bring God’s comfort to you! That is a gift that is perfect for you, rejoice in the goodness of God. Don’t be like me. I didn’t think very highly of the gifts my mom was giving. I thought I had enough white shirts and ties. You can never have enough of God’s Word. You can never replace God’s Word with anything else. God’s Word, as it strengthens you to stand in God’s grace, saves you from death. It saves you from death by strengthening your faith in Jesus who has taken away the curse of death and replaced it with eternal life in him.

What a gift God gives you to bring to others! God’s message still hasn’t changed. He puts you into the lives of people who need to hear the good news God has given, the news of sin forgiven through faith in Jesus, the news of death defeated and eternal life won through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Since you have such good news to share, God gives you instruction through Isaiah, too, **“lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid”**.

God once again gives you a gift this Advent season – the gift of prophets. He gives you this gift of those who share God’s Word with you so that you are firm in your faith as you await Jesus’ return. And God gives you as his gift to others. He gives you to be prophets, to bring comfort for those weighed down by sin, to bring comfort to those facing their own mortality, to bring the comfort of sin forgiven through faith in Jesus.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord ... now and forevermore. (Jude 24-25)

Amen