

*Texts: Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 11-5*

*Subject: Comfort My People*

*Theme: The Rough Reality*

*2nd Sunday of Advent; Dec. 8, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,

Amen.

*It can't get any worse.*

*This too shall pass.*

*Tomorrow is another day.*

Have you used these words? Have they been given to you as comfort in a difficult time?

Did it help? What does truly bring comfort? Food? Family? Friends? Prayer?

We need comfort this time of year. A bag of miniature Reese's peanut butter cups does it for me. Christmas cookies are good. We can seek comfort in unhealthy ways too. The days are busy, the season can be stressful, and filled with pressure, painful memories, and loneliness. A word of comfort goes a long way. We ought to speak tenderly to one another.

This weekend my family and I went to see the Rainbow Theatre production of a 'Charlie Brown Christmas.' You know it, don't you? Lucy gives her brother Linus a hard time for carrying around his blue blanket everywhere he goes. Charlie Brown regrets his choice of Christmas tree, saying, "everything I do turns into a disaster." Linus brings the message about the true meaning of Christmas, complete with scriptural references:

*this shall be a sign unto you; You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

At the end of the story, he wraps his blanket around the sad little tree, his favorite object of comfort, now passed on to the drooping fir. And gives us all a reminder of the one who gives true comfort, our Lord and Savior.

Our comfort is coming.

The prophet Isaiah - in chapter 1, told how God had had enough of false worship - the people were insincere, there was no justice, no peace. There were warnings of wrath, retribution. Struggles, and trial. Nothing they did could help. The Babylonians came, destroying the temple, tearing down the house of God in Jerusalem, and taking away the people into exile in a foreign land. A generation later, we hear that now, God has had enough of punishment. Jerusalem has had her fair share. *The rough reality* they had experienced was coming to an end.

Words are powerful. They can lift us up and break us down. We might hold onto words that were spoken anger, or words of love passed down. I remember words of those who have gone onto the glory of the Lord - they shared wisdom and hope with me. We remember words from history - yesterday, on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, we recalled the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt; "Yesterday, December 7th, 1941, a date which will live in infamy...The United States was at peace with that Nation." Peace. We like the concept. We who have lived removed from the reality of war for so long think we live in peace, but those who have family members serving overseas know otherwise. We are not at peace in so many ways.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, the divine voice tells the prophet - cry out with a new message of deliverance. This is an imperative to speak to the heart of the people who have suffered so much. They needed to hear a word of encouragement and

comfort, to move them forward into a new reality. They needed prophetic imagination, to see the new thing God was doing in them and with them.

But this new thing would be lost on many, who only knew the rough reality of living in Babylon - sure, they knew it wasn't their homeland, but it wasn't *that* bad. The Jewish exiles were allowed to live, to earn a living - they weren't slaves, they were not oppressed. The children of those who had lived in Israel and Judah in the 'good 'ol days' would have had a hard time imagining what it was like to live like their parents did.

Hammurabi was the King of Babylon - he called himself things like the "good shepherd" and said, "in my bosom I carried the peoples." He had built highways for a procession of their gods, and now the image of a highway out of exile to bring the people back home gives comfort.

*Build a new highway! the prophet cries out.*

*Make room, prepare the way for God to lead!*

All we need to do is look around and we can see the rough reality we live in. People around us are often hungry, short tempered, desperate. Like Charlie Brown - everything seems to turn into disaster.

Isaiah seems to complain - the lives and loyalty of those who have been so far away from Jerusalem, are like grass - here today, gone tomorrow. But the promise is good - the same God who delivered the people from slavery in Egypt, through the sea in the Exodus, would deliver them. God promised to bring comfort, transformation, a great leveling. God was going to bring about change in a most unexpected way - the world would look different after. In 539 B.C., Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonian empire, and allowed the exiled people to return home to Jerusalem. This foreign

conqueror was understood as the one God would use to make a way. The people would travel home to Jerusalem. What had seemed like insurmountable obstacles would be removed, and their journey would be swift. The prophet calls the people to trust in God to deliver them. God alone, would do what needed to be done.

When we look around at the problems we face, in our families, in our city, in the church, can we put aside our need to fix everything? Can we trust that God is still at work, doing a new thing, leading us into a promised future? Can we see the world as God sees it? Full of the possibility for peace? It takes imagination - it takes a vision, of a new reality, with the rough places made smooth, the mountains made low, the valleys lifted up - a smooth ride.

How can we prepare ourselves and those we meet to see the world in this way? To trust in God again? How can we share the story of faith that calls us into this new future? Sometimes all we have are words. Other times we can act to serve people, to make a difference in their daily life. Always, we have a powerful story to share. When words run out, we can simply point to the cross. The prophet calls the people to speak good news - get up to that high mountain! The word for 'herald' (v.9) is the same word for evangelist - one who shares the gospel. When we share this good news, we help mountains come down for others, we share the peace that is in us, and multiply it in the world. And it changes us, too. Freed from captivity to *fear*, to *complacency*, to *the status quo*, we are freed to go and share a message of redemption and peace in Jesus!

God's word gives comfort, but if we are like Linus, and we're carrying it around all the time and afraid to share it, we miss an opportunity to comfort one another. God is calling us to go and tell the good news of Jesus to a world in need - to bear glad tidings,

to speak the peace of Christ, believe in the peace Christ brings, and to work toward peace in the world wherever we have an opportunity.

God promises - comfort is coming - as we wait, we prepare, we share. The rough reality we have known will be redeemed and made new. This Savior is the true ruler of the world, and is the true good shepherd. The glory of the Lord will be revealed in him, and the whole world will know.

Yes, words have power. They have the power to comfort when we share our stories of God's grace in our lives, stories over overcoming obstacles, stories of navigating a rough reality to find hope and a peace in the future. God's Word gives comfort, and brings about a new creation, and the Word of God stands forever.