

Comfort, Yes, Comfort

The Nativity of John the Baptist
Isaiah 40:1-8

24 June 2007

In the name of our Savior, Jesus, dear friends. Our God is a God of mercy, a God of grace. Do you believe that? God says to us through His prophet Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." Paul tells us in his first Epistle to Timothy, "God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." Peter tells us in his second epistle, "The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." It is true that God punishes, it is true that God damns, but it is also true that He doesn't want to punish or damn anyone. His forgiveness and grace is offered to all the world and it is his fervent desire that every human being receive His grace in Christ, His Son, and live forever.

Look how Jesus mourns over Jerusalem as He considers its impending destruction and says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." Matt. 23:37 Even the stoning and the killing of His own prophets could not destroy Jesus' love for these people.

Nor can anything destroy His love for you. What does the Lord say in Isaiah? "The mountains may move and the hills waver, but my love will never leave you." (Is. 54:10) We have such a hard time believing that, don't we? And it's not surprising that it's hard for us to believe in God's ongoing, persistent, never-ending love. After all, we fail Him so often. There are certain sins of which probably all of us are guilty – the sin of pride, the sin of too little love for our neighbor, the sin of too little love for God.

But in regard to many other sins, we differ, don't we? Some of us are weaker in certain areas, others are weaker in other ways. But we all have weaknesses which lead us to fall far short of the standards God sets. Take your pick of the following. Lying, cheating, stealing,

being mean or condescending or intimidating to people, lusting, watching dirty movies, coveting, hating, being bitter, resentful, persistently angry or dissatisfied, constantly critical of others or hurting others, slandering, deceiving, being lazy, neglecting your duties to help and love those around you, taking God's name in vain, dishonoring parents, showing disrespect or contempt for people we ought to honor. We can all plug ourselves in here somewhere, probably in a number of places. We've failed in so many ways. Does God really forgive us, regardless of how much wrong we've done? Yes.

Even those of us who rarely, if ever, read His Word, the Holy Scriptures? Consider what an insult that is to Him! The one who made us speaks to us. Yes, the one who made us and against whom we have sinned countless times, still loves us enough to speak to us and tell us about His love and about His forgiveness and about the salvation He offers to each and every one of us – and many people don't even bother to listen. Does He forgive even this sin? Yes, He does.

But because we have so much trouble believing that he is merciful, believing that He forgives, God promises in our text for this morning that he is going to send someone who will prepare the way for God's mercy and grace and love to be poured out upon His people as they have never seen it poured out before. He will send a man whose voice will cry out in the wilderness and whose message will foretell the coming of, "Comfort, comfort." His name is John, his father wrote. We observe today the event of his birth, the birth of him who came to be known as John the Baptizer. John is not born primarily to be a comforter; but he is born primarily to point to a Comforter. He is born to point to Jesus.

Already before his birth he is pointing to Jesus. Mary visits Elizabeth and John jumps for joy in Elizabeth's womb. After all, the Savior has just come into his presence. And when we look at

John's ministry, we see that this pointing to Jesus never ends. It is about Jesus that John says, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." It is about Jesus that John says, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." It is about Jesus that John declares, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." It is about Jesus that John insists, "He must increase; I must decrease."

It is very interesting to see how John views himself. Jesus said about John, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Yet John says about Jesus, "I am not worthy to untie His sandals." In another place John compares Jesus to the bridegroom and himself to the bridegroom's friend. Who is it that ought to receive attention on the day of the wedding? The bridegroom and the bride who is given to him. The friend of the bridegroom stands in the background and is content to share in the joy he experiences when he hears the bridegroom's voice. And so John fades from the scene in order that Jesus may fill the scene. In the Gospel of Luke we read about the birth of John and how an angel appears to Zacharias to announce his birth. But it is not long before the account of his birth is completely overshadowed by the birth of Jesus when the entire sky is filled with angels to announce the birth of the Savior of the world. Even John's own father, when he sang about John's birth, as we heard in this morning's Gospel lesson, spent more time singing about Jesus than about his own son John.

How different is John's ministry from that of so many today who seem intent upon drawing attention to themselves. Not John: "Don't look at me; look at Him." Always pointing to Jesus, always pointing to him who is the source of all comfort for the Christian. Today we celebrate the birth of him who was born to point to another. In our text we hear him crying in the wilderness.

But before he even begins crying out in our text, we hear God telling us that comfort is coming. In the second verse of Isaiah 40 God's people hear that their sins have been paid for doubly. In fact, everything in these first two verses seems to be doubled. First the comfort is doubled. "Comfort, yes, comfort my people says your God." Then the message is doubled. It is to be spoken not just once, but twice. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem" and "proclaim to her." Finally the mercy is doubled. What is Isaiah to say to Jerusalem? Tell her, "That her hard service has been completed," and "her sin has been paid for."

Everything is doubled. So much repetition of comfort! Why? Because our God wants us to believe it. So he gives this message of comfort special emphasis. We are never to think that He doesn't love us. We are never to think that God wants to punish us. As long as we live, we are to know that God forgives and loves and wishes to save us and bring all our suffering and unhappiness to an end. We need this double comfort. Because we not only have our sins to consider. We have death to face. Later in our text God says, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.... Surely, the people are like grass. The grass withers and the flower falls." And we know it's true! We may live a bit longer, but as surely as the grass and the flowers die, so will we. And doesn't our death serve to emphasize the seriousness of our sin? Absolutely! And so we need to be comforted. We need double comfort – comfort in the face of sin and comfort in the face of death. And God gives it to us. In His message of comfort He deals with both sin and death.

He says first, "Tell Jerusalem that her time of hard service has been completed." This life brings us suffering and hardship and anguish and although God also blesses us with happiness and times of relative peace, we can all understand, especially those who are older, why this world would be called a vale of tears. But your time of hard service, with all of its suffering and pain, will come to an end. It will not last forever. And it won't end in a humiliating defeat for you. Death does not have the last word. What does our text say?

“Surely, the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.” And what does the Word of our God say?

It says in Isaiah, “Your dead will live.” It says in Job, “Afterward, my skin will surround this body, and in my flesh I will see God. Whom I myself will see, my eyes will behold one who is not a stranger.” It says in John, “He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live and he who lives and believes in me shall never die.” It says again in John, “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and they shall never perish. Nobody can pluck them out of my hand.” It says in I Corinthians, “O death where is your sting? O grave where is your victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!” It says in Revelation, “Be faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life.”

“Be comforted, my people,” God is saying, “when your hard service is ended, I will rescue you from death and you will live forever. And how can this be? My people, your sin has been paid for. In fact, your sin has not only been paid for. You have received from the Lord’s hand double for your sins.”

You should never doubt that you have been forgiven. And there are two reasons you should never doubt that. The first reason is that God Himself has made the payment for your sins. What does Isaiah say? Tell Jerusalem “that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand, double for all her sins.” From the Lord’s own hand you’ve received payment for your sins. The payment for your guilt, the atonement for all the wrong you have done, is not some material gift of very limited value; it is not some pious work or even the accumulation of good works that you set before the throne of God with the desperate hope that it will be enough. There would be little comfort for us in such a payment for Isaiah tells us elsewhere that even our most righteous works are like dirty rags in God’s eyes. No, the payment for our sin comes from the hand of God Himself. There can be no question as to its worth. If God almighty makes the payment for our guilt, how can it be insufficient?

In fact, what does Isaiah say – what’s the second reason for which we should never doubt our forgiveness? From God’s own hand we’ve received **double** for all our sins. After all, what have we received? The Son of God Himself took on human flesh, became one of us, lived for us, suffered for us, died for us, bearing our sin and guilt, punished on the cross with our punishment so that we might be forgiven. No wonder Isaiah says Israel has received double for all her sins. Not only does God Himself make the payment; the Son of God Himself is the payment!

And it is to point to this truth that John the Baptizer is born. In the desert he cries out, “Prepare the way for the Lord; Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” Yes, he points to the one who has come to make the payment; he points to the one who has come to be the payment; he points to Jesus; he points to Jesus and he says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

In the proclamation of these words, he fulfills his life’s mission for he was born to proclaim the glory of another, to prepare the way for Him in whom alone we have forgiveness and life and hope. His entire life has but one purpose and it is to introduce Him in whom God’s people find comfort.

Comfort, yes comfort! That is God’s final word to His people. That is His final word to you. It is a word about His Son, a word our text tells us will stand forever. We thank God for this word of comfort; we thank God for Him who is the source of all comfort, our Savior Jesus; and on this day we also thank God for John the Baptizer who came to prepare the way for Him who brings all comfort, who came to point persistently to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God lead us to follow his example and point people always to Jesus who is our hope and our salvation and our everlasting comfort. Amen.

By Daniel Preus – June 24, 2007
Soli Deo Gloria