

Isaiah 40:1-5, 10-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "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. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

John 10:11-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

I jolted awake from a terrible and terrifying nightmare.

I was young and single, traveling almost constantly for business,  
which meant I spent most of my nights alone in a hotel room.  
I enjoyed my work, but that nightmare really got my attention.

I was frightened for I had actually strayed somewhat, some distance  
from the committed and faithful Christianity of my up-bringing,  
and in my nightmare, I remember running from an uncertain danger,  
and I woke up feeling fear and unresolved panic.

Shaken & troubled, I got up, knelt by my bed in that hotel room.

I was driven to pray and expected to feel and experience  
the harsh judgement of a disappointed and angry God ---  
-- but instead I heard and received a message of grace,  
"Comfort, comfort my child, says your God",  
an echo of the passage we just read from Isaiah.

**Question, what does make us acceptable, and truly a child of God?**

Is it that we are good people who avoid sinful deeds,

or is it that by grace, we are in a relationship with God

which affects and guides how we live out in the world?

For centuries God had send prophet after prophet to ancient Israel,  
urging them and warning them of the coming harsh consequences  
of turning aside from God's ways of justice and compassion,  
and finally, the hammer had fallen hard.

The nation of Israel had been utterly defeated and destroyed,  
forced into exile and to live as captives in distant Babylon,

and perhaps worst of all, knowing that they had refused  
to listen and heed God's urgings and endless warnings,  
they had in fact, brought this suffering down on themselves.

**Now they were broken and crushed into absolute defeat & hopelessness,  
knowing that they faced a grim future for themselves & their children  
and feeling abandoned by God, lost in ways that they couldn't fix.**

So imagine the shock of hearing the prophet's proclamation, vs. 1-2

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her  
term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*

**Yes, God was very present even amid their struggle and suffering.**

In Hebrew, the word, *Comfort* literally describes a situation  
of someone completely out of breath, totally exhausted and panting,  
but then someone arrives who supports and strengthens them  
by holding them up, sustaining to catch their failing breath,  
**which is a wonderful and helpful word-picture of grace.**

The next phrase *received... double for all her sins*  
is a somewhat misleading translation, for it does not mean,  
"Israel has suffered double the amount for all her sins."

But rather, the word, *double* describes a business transaction.

In the ancient world, when someone couldn't repay a debt they owed,  
they could be forced into slavery until they worked off their debt,  
and the debt-amount was specified on paper, nailed to a doorpost.

And if someone paid off the debt, **redeeming them from slavery**,  
then a second piece of paper would be nailed over the first,  
indicating that the debt had been paid, it had been *doubled*.

In Hebrew *doubled* refers to that second paper covering the first,  
as public witness and testimony that the debt had been fully paid.

So, to the struggling, suffering and broken Israelites in Babylon,  
Isaiah's proclamation is about divine mercy and restoration,  
that **God will "double"**, or **pay-off their indebtedness of sin**.

Far from rejection, God's promising grace, redemption & restoration,  
so clear a path and make a highway for hope through the wilderness,  
because the people are coming back home to the Promised land,  
an end to suffering, exile & captivity in Babylon, vs. 3-4,

A voice cries out: "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.

**That's a wonderful picture of grace, God's steadfast love in action.**

Through Isaiah, God is promising these broken – discouraged people,  
there is no valley deep enough, there is no mountain high enough,  
there is no wilderness so remote or desert inhospitable enough,  
**to keep God from coming to redeem, bless & restore you,  
and bring to you hope for rescue, healing & salvation.**

God will guide them along their journey home through the wilderness  
just like a shepherd carrying them in his mighty arms,  
a powerful and unrelenting love that will not let go, vs. 11

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently  
lead the mother sheep.

The message to the struggling, suffering and broken Israelites  
was one of divine mercy, power, comfort, blessing and hope.  
Far from abandonment by God amid brokenness and disappointment,  
God promises comfort and care overcoming their wounds & losses.

That message is also for us today, that  
however turbulent, tragic or distressing our lives may become,  
whatever our captivity, our brokenness, our hurt, our losses,  
God promises infinite new possibilities, - REAL comfort.

**That is a promise, hope and gift that we need to hear and to heed.**

It is also a call for us to reflect on the way we're living,  
our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak,  
our relationships, our attitude, our faith and walk with God...  
... and deal with any rough places, with all that stands in the way,  
anything that hinders a life faithful to the Lord our God.

**If we're are not headed toward God and more meaningful discipleship,  
then repent, turn around toward God's grace and respond,  
and don't keep going further away from where we want to end up...**

... but turn to receive the blessings God intends for us,  
**by living out an appropriate and faithful response  
to God's wonderful gift of grace, compassion and love.**

Years ago, that was the message I got after my nightmare.

As in our Call to Worship, God explains through Ezekiel, vs. 15-16,

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ...

In this Ezekiel text, God reassures us, by promising to seek out  
the defeated & struggling failures who have messed up their lives,  
offering renewed hope and the possibility of restoration,  
even to those who are justly suffering and enduring  
the consequences of their own dreadful decisions.

We know that sometimes we fail and mess things up in terrible ways  
and often make wrong choices and some very foolish compromises.  
We know that our lives can get very messy & complicated because  
at times we do and say things that for good reason we regret.

But the truth and good news is,  
that we are still precious, the beloved sheep of God's pasture,  
who seeks and finds us even when it's our own fault we got lost.

In fulfillment of the OT promises, and the prophecies of salvation,  
Jesus did seek the sinner, the lost, outcast, broken and strayed.

And how comforting it is for us to know,  
that the lost sheep does nothing to prompt the shepherd's search  
other than managing to stray, to get lost, distant & damaged.

As John explains, Jesus fulfilled those OT promises, vs. 11 and 14,

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... And I lay down my life for the sheep.

The context of this passage is important for us to know & understand.  
In the prior chapter, Jesus had healed a blind man on the Sabbath  
which led to a conflict with the religious authorities,  
who could care less about the suffering of the blind man.

This passage contrasts Jesus against their hypocrisy,  
pointing back to the Old Testament teachings and tradition  
such as the prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah and the Psalms,  
that in contrast to the false shepherds of Israel,  
the Lord is my shepherd, Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

In contrast to the powers and circumstances of this world,  
God, through Jesus our good shepherd, never abandons us,  
but freely gives himself entirely, even his life for us.

In the original Greek, the word translated here as “good”,  
specifically means the ideal, an authentic or true example,  
in contrast to something that is not good, real or true.

So ultimately, the most critical question that we all face is,  
**who is our shepherd?, and who is protecting and taking care of us?**

That question is well answered in the familiar Psalm 23:1-2,  
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters.

The psalmist declares, the Lord my shepherd provides all that I need,  
and my shepherd is always with me to guide and comfort me.

My good shepherd knows me completely **and loves me anyway,**  
and by grace provides for my care, growth and well-being.

And for those who do hear and accept, those do who believe and follow,  
even in the extreme of death's darkest valley or worst struggle,  
our shepherding God remains unmistakably close by our side.

That is not saying that our lives won't ever be difficult or hard.  
There is no promise that we won't suffer, struggle or hurt,  
but God promises us true comfort, a reason for hope,  
because God's power and presence assures us of victory  
even amid the most tragic, the most terrible or hurtful.

**None of us  
are strangers to the concept and reality of struggle and suffering.**

**We live far less** than the rich meaningful and purposeful lives,  
the full blessings that our God & loving Creator intends for us.

And God's promise of comfort, God's upholding strength and support  
will not necessarily the repair of all our broken dreams & desires,  
nor fully restore even our deepest losses & tragedies,  
nor always give us everything that we ask for or want.

Nothing in the Bible promises that we will be spared from suffering,  
but God does promise his constant abiding comfort and grace  
that amid life's brokenness God will strengthen & support us.

**God promises open and waiting arms to comfort those who seek him.**

I am almost positive that none of us possess enough power  
or strength enough to survive the brokenness of this world  
except for the truth of God's strengthening comfort and hope,  
the gift & blessing of God's sustaining presence within us, vs. 1, 11,

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs  
in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

**The message is, your God loves you, and is coming to heal & rescue you.**

**That is the true Gospel message of God's grace and compassion,**

**the Good News by which we are saved into Jesus Christ,**

**and the true message of God's grace that the Church**

**is called and equipped to live out and proclaim.**

The Church is a bright light shining in a sin & shame darkened world,

as God's grace brings hope and love to the lost, guilty and broken...

**... but somehow, sometimes the Church has been distracted,  
and sometimes, somehow the Church has gotten off-message.**

Our walk with God, our spiritual life and discipleship can erode  
if we slip away from regular prayer and devotional study,  
or if it becomes a rote task that doesn't feed our souls,  
or if we don't find ways to connect and care for others...  
... distractions and fear can grow and crowd-out trust, hope and peace.

I don't know of a time in history, certainly not in my lifetime  
when we have seen our world and culture more broken and lost,  
more polarized, antagonistic, more vicious & corrupted.

**The unfailing promise of God's gracious mercy is our only hope,  
and the Church of Jesus Christ has got to get on-message,  
and we've got to focus on proclaiming the Gospel Good News.**

**What matters in this world is God's radical willingness to forgive –  
and that without any limit or boundaries our God seeks the lost,  
for that forbearance and compassion is very nature of God,  
that is to flow freely through us toward other sinners,  
and for that Gospel truth Jesus came, died and rose again,  
and calls the Church to proclaim, to live and make known.**

As we read in Hebrews 13:1, 20-21

Let mutual love continue. Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, **the great shepherd of the sheep**, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.