

Isaiah 40:1-11

COMFORT IN THE WILDERNESS

I was listening to the radio one morning in Richmond. The announcer initiated a game where he would play only three seconds of a song, and the first caller to name the musical group and the name of the song would receive a prize. That day, I knew immediately both the song and the band. I rushed over to the phone, called the radio station and, to my surprise, I was live on the airwaves. “Good morning, what’s the name of the song and the band?” I heard myself speaking from out of the radio as I said, “The song is ‘Day Tripper’ and it’s by the Beatles.” “You are absolutely correct. What’s your name and where are you calling from?” My name is Randy and I’m from Richmond.” “Well, Randy, you have just won a pair of tickets to ‘Bazaar, Bazaar.’ Thanks for calling and come by the station to pick up your free tickets!”

I groaned inwardly as I thought to myself, “I should have said, that was Brown Sugar by the Rolling Stones” – then I would’ve been wrong and would not have won tickets to Bazaar, Bazaar, which is a huge flea market in Richmond that is packed into two very large warehouses over near the racetrack. To make a long story short, Monica and I went to Bazaar, Bazaar. I quickly realized that the name should be changed to *Bizarre, Bizarre!* It was a horrible experience. The place was crowded and noisy; people were extremely rude as they pushed and shoved and cut others off. In that place, the holiday season brought out the worst in people – especially me as I made a solemn vow to Monica that I would never ever set foot inside of Bazaar, Bazaar ever again. And, I have kept that promise!

As I reflect on my life, I realize that I have been extremely privileged to have done most of the things I wanted to do; and, with few exceptions (which would include Bazaar, Bazaar) I have not been subjected to a great deal of suffering. Thus, it’s hard to imagine the severe strain and depression that our spiritual ancestors experienced during the time of the Babylonian exile. Whereas I endured two of the longest hours of my life inside the Bazaar, Bazaar flea market, the Jews had been captured by the Babylonians and deported - forced to march across the desert from Judea to Babylon, where they spent the next sixty years in captivity.

Can we even begin to appreciate the good news found in chapter 40 of Second Isaiah? To a people, who had suffered hard and long for almost six decades, in the midst of their darkness the light began to dawn as the prophet spoke on behalf of God, saying: “Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God.” Though the people Israel had suffered many hardships and afflictions due to their sinful actions and suitable punishment, all that was about to change. God was acting on Israel’s behalf to set her free. Before long, Yahweh would raise up King Cyrus of Persia who would defeat the Babylonians and allow the Jews to return to the Holy Land once more. God had set in motion that which would come to pass. God would see to it that the Chosen People were restored to their homeland for they had “done their time and paid for their crime” of being rebellious against God - bowing to false idols and trying to forge military alliances with foreign powers rather than trusting in God to protect and provide for them.

There was comfort in the wilderness of their Babylonian exile for the Jews were finally going home! In fact, God planned to transform the very desert that the Israelites

had traversed kicking and screaming sixty years earlier into a royal road right through the harsh and chaotic wilderness for the purpose of claiming God's very own people. Furthermore, Yahweh would be at the front of this grand procession, leading the way - just as God once led the Israelites through another wilderness as they turned their backs on Egypt and headed home to the Holy Land. And, by being the Grand Marshal of this parade, there would be no doubt - all peoples (in Babylon, Israel, and points in between) would see the glory of the Lord revealed.

The good news found within this text for us is that "the Word of our God will stand forever." In other words, God still speaks a word of "Comfort" to God's children, no matter what our wilderness experience is at present. It may be that our particular wilderness is caused by the downturn in the financial market and the return of a recession. Even in this crazy economic wilderness, the Lord comforts us and reminds us to trust God far more than our gold. God will provide. We will have enough to live on and still be able to pass on to others - both our children and those in need. We may not have as much as before but we will have what we need.

God speaks the word of "Comfort" to those facing health problems. God helps us to be grateful for each day that we do have. We hope for better days to come, when our strength will return. We draw strength from both God and those who surround us, pray for us, and support us on the journey. And even in the future, when our physical health is spent, our hope in Christ's victory over death will lead us to our true, heavenly home.

As Christians, we hear God's word of "Comfort" from the vantage point of living on this side of Jesus Christ's first advent and his life, death, and resurrection. We are comforted to know that God, in Jesus Christ, has conquered sin and death, and he has made it possible for us to come home to God once again. The wilderness may not vanish instantaneously. God may give us time in the desert to realize our mistakes, repent of our sins, or learn new lessons about life. But, eventually, God will speak the word, "Comfort, comfort, my people," and then God will act on our behalf.

Reflect on your own lives, if you will. Think of the numerous times, from childhood on, when you encountered what you thought was a dead-end or a desert place, some problem that seemed hopeless. Then, reflect on how God acted in that situation to provide both comfort and a way in the wilderness - a way that led you out of the problem and into some new and peaceful solution. When one door closed, God opened another!

Dr. Fred Craddock remembers a little girl in one of his early pastorates. Her parents sent her to church but they never came with her. They dropped her off at church and then they would go out for Sunday breakfast. The father was an executive for a chemical company; he was upwardly mobile, ambitious. The whole town knew about their Saturday night parties - parties given not for entertainment but as part of their whole upwardly mobile program, which determined who was invited. And, the whole town knew of the wild, vulgar things that went on at those parties.

But every Sunday, the little girl was in church. One Sunday, however, the little girl was there with her Mom and Dad. At the end of the service, the invitation was given, and her Mom and Dad came down front and joined the church. After the service, the young pastor asked the new members, "What prompted this?" "Do you know about our parties?" they asked. "Yeah, I heard of your parties," said the pastor. "Well, we had one last night. It got a bit loud, a little rough, and there was too much drinking. It woke up our daughter, and she came downstairs and she was on about the third step. She saw all

of the eating and drinking going on and said, 'Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Goodnight, everybody.' She went back upstairs. People began to say, 'It's getting late, we really must be going,' and 'Thanks for a great evening,' and 'Thanks for a good time.' Within two minutes the room was empty." The Mom and Dad picked up napkins and spilled peanuts, took empty glasses on trays to the kitchen. And they looked at each other, and he said what they were both thinking, "Where do we think we're going?" God had come for them. God had brought them comfort. And, God had brought them home! (*Pulpit Resource*, Dec. 1996, p. 41)

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord!" Whatever wilderness you are in, listen up for God is speaking the word of "Comfort" to you and your particular situation. God wants you to find your way home, to find peace at last. We need to only look as far as the communion table and, with eyes of faith, see the Lord Jesus, who is the Host, who even now speaks in quiet and comforting words to us all, saying, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). "God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather us like lambs in his arms. And carry us in his bosom."

This is the Word of our God that will stand forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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