

## Week 6

### Isaiah 40:1-11 "Our GREAT God Brings Comfort"

Begin with prayer

Caring God,

We sometimes get bogged down by the weight of the world, by the difficulties and struggles that we encounter in life. Sometimes we try to carry it on our own, but we can't.

We pray that we will turn to you, and that we may seek and find comfort in you alone. We ask that you will help us to be renewed by you and know you more.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

Read the text for today. (Suggestion: Go around and read it out loud, each person taking a verse.)

Ask: What stood out to you about this text? What, if anything, doesn't make sense? What caught your attention and sparked curiosity?

The idea of "Comfort" can provoke a cloud of images ranging from La-Z-Boy recliners to Royal Caribbean cruises. "Comfort food" is about the nostalgia and sentiment that can come from a familiar and satisfying dish. "Creature comforts" are luxurious material items that help provide extreme bodily comfort. "Comfort" connects to all that is warm, fuzzy, and satisfying. We don't often connect the idea of comfort to strength or power. Comfort is putting your feet up after a hard day of work, sipping some coffee, and enjoying the cozy, crackling fire. We often believe that comfort is a soft concept. Comfort is not a "working" word.

However, the English word "comfort" is a combination of the Latin words "cum-fortis" or "with strength." So the theological concept of comfort is a word with muscle. Before it's some tender and cozy sigh of relief, comfort comes first as a bracing, in-your-face message about what is what in life. We need to be unsettled and made uneasy before we will be able to experience the depth of our only comfort.

If comfort is going to come to us at all, we need to begin by confronting all that is wrong in our lives. Isaiah 40 says the same thing. Although this is one of the Bible's more famous passages about comfort, we sometimes forget how stark these verses are. Obviously the comfort Isaiah is commanded to proclaim is valuable only because the people had been suffering. What's more, verse 2 makes clear that the source of their suffering has been their own sinfulness. Comfort comes not to those who deserve a reward, but instead to those who have already felt the pain and the sting of where sin can lead you in life.

The rest of this passage conveys the link between getting serious about life's jagged edges and the emergence of true comfort. Verse 3 says that the way of the Lord begins in the middle of the desert. God begins to construct his highway to deep and lasting peace in the wilderness, which is the biblical location of evil. If the salvation of God is going to emerge from anywhere, it will be from the middle of life's ugliness. What's more, the following verses say that we need God to be the One who will lead us out of the wilderness, because on our own we can do nothing, we are like fragile grass.

If we want to access the comfort Isaiah is declaring, we need to first acknowledge the difficult and ugly things about life, while also acknowledging those things in our own lives and hearts. We need to own up to the reality of sin. We need to meet God in the wilderness and then admit that we are too weak, too grass-like to save ourselves. In fact, given our sin and weakness, we need to turn ourselves over to God completely. If we do, Isaiah 40 can become our reality: we will be the lambs safely nestled into the arms of our shepherd.

That image receives a mighty boost in the New Testament when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. How often do we realize that to some people, that may **not** seem like a comforting image at all? We need to be carried by God precisely because we cannot make our own way, we cannot construct our own highway out of sin's desert wasteland. So we turn ourselves over to God in Christ and declare that we are not our own anymore. We do not belong to ourselves. Someone else has a total claim on us. Unfortunately, some people find that idea to be anything but comforting.

It is difficult for those of us who are so thoroughly familiar with the gospel to conceive of how this may sound in the ears to someone unfamiliar with Christianity. In fact, it may even strike some of us as bizarre that anyone could look at the image of the Good Shepherd and see something offensive. But let's give the world some credit: maybe those who are offended by that image are more in touch with its radical nature than those of us who look at it without batting an eye.

Isaiah 40 is a wonderful message of comfort, but it comes to people who have long suffered for their sins. Isaiah 40 makes sense only if we are first willing to own up to our sins. It's a sobering message. But without it, none of the "Comfort, Comfort" in the world can find its proper resting place in the human heart.

#### **Let's talk about it:**

The incarnation comes **into** our sinfulness so that what can emerge **from** it into all that is newness of life and the hope of a New Creation.

There is only One who leads to the restoration of shalom. But we keep people from the hope of peace and restoration when we close our church windows to the hurts and pains of this world and only focus on positive and upbeat themes.

- How do we go about sharing the gospel "with strength"?
- Talk about whose strength is involved in the "with strength" of the word comfort. Your strength? God's strength? Both?
- The Heidelberg Catechism is one of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church, and in the very first question and answer, it asks, "What is your only **comfort** in life and in death?" To which the answer is, "That I am not my own, but belong...to Jesus Christ." How is that comforting to you?
- When have you had "desert moments"? How has God been building a way out?
- What other scripture comes to mind when you read verse 11? Has this imagery been a comfort to you in the past? Is this imagery new to you, or are you seeing it differently now?
- How is the construction of a highway a message of comfort?