

12.7.08 The God We Are Waiting For Is A God of Comfort Isaiah 40:1-11

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Against the background of Jerusalem's destruction & the looting & burning of the royal house & treasuries, Isaiah 40 speaks a stunning word of hope & encouragement. Isaiah chapters 40-66 were composed sometime after the events of Isaiah 1-39 had taken place. There is a price to be paid when we sin, there are consequences, both foreseen & unforeseen. The prophet is saying that penalty has been paid, and now a new day is coming. **The purpose of Isaiah 40:1-11 is to share God's comfort & compassion with God's people.**

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

2 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.

3 A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 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.”

6 A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 *The grass withers, the flower fades,*

when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass.

8 *The grass withers, the flower fades;*

but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, *herald of good tidings;*

lift up your voice with strength,

O Jerusalem, *herald of good tidings,* lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah, “*Here is your God!*”

10 See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

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.

On Tuesday evening, Pastor Mary and the Deacons led a time of scripture, stories, sharing and prayer for those who have a member of their family who is a prodigal, who is lost, who has wandered from the truth or God's path and ended up in trouble or difficulty. While there were not too many of us there, I think most of us know people whose hearts are aching for a loved one or friend because of something that is happening in their lives. So many people need comfort because someone has messed up his or her life badly or because someone they love has died.

A story that touched my heart so that I never forgot it I learned in a class with Elie Wiesel on *Parables and Paradoxes* at Boston University. It is the story of the house that has never known sorrow. A long time ago in China, a woman and her husband suffered the heartbreaking loss of their child. Regardless of the love that her husband had for her, the woman was inconsolable. Finally, the husband suggested that she go see the holy man who lived outside the village to see if he could help her. So she did. When she knocked on the door, the holy man answered and looking at her, he knew what had happened. She cried,

*"My child has died, and I cannot find any comfort or peace – what can I do?
Can you help me?"*

The Holy Man looked deeply and compassionately into her eyes and said, *"Yes, I can, but first, I am hungry and I have not yet eaten. Please bring me a bowl of rice from a house that has never known sorrow. Then I shall eat and we will find an answer that comforts you."*

The woman was encouraged to know the Holy Man was so confident he could find an answer to comfort her and that all he asked for was a bowl of rice because everyone in China eats rice every day.

"Thank you!" the woman said through her tears, *"I will be right back."*
"I will be waiting right here," the Holy Man replied.

The woman hurried out the door and went to the first small home she came to on the edge of the village. She knocked on the door and said, *"Excuse me, please, my son died recently and I have not been able to find any comfort or peace.*

The Holy Man will help me, all I need is a bowl of rice from a house that has never known sorrow."

The man who answered the door said, *"Well, of course we have rice, but our oldest son left home three months ago and we don't know where he is and my father died just last*

month, so I cannot say this is a house that has never known sorrow because we miss them both.”

The man and his wife invited the woman in and they had tea and talked about their son and the father and the woman shared about her son. Before they knew it, a couple hours had passed, and the woman thanked them for their hospitality and kind words but begged their pardon because she had to go.

She walked down the road a ways until she came to another modest home. She knocked on the door and said, *“Excuse me, please, my son died recently and I have not been able to find any comfort or peace.*

All I need is a bowl of rice from a house that has never known sorrow.”

She barely had gotten the words out when she knew she had come to the wrong place. The woman who answered the door had sadness in her dark eyes. She said, *“Is this some kind of cruel joke? My only daughter died a year ago and I my heart is broken.”* *“I am so terribly sorry,”* the woman said, *“My son died last month and I don’t know what to do.”*

The two women fell into each other’s arms and cried together. They had tea and talked about their children – their personalities, what they liked to do, the shape of their faces and the sound of their laughter. Before they knew it the hour had grown late and the woman was invited to spend the night. Together they talked into the night until finally going to sleep.

In the morning, the women exchanged farewells, thankful for their new found friendship in the midst of their grief.

By now you know what happened. Every house in every village the woman went to in her quest to find a home that had not known sorrow, had, in fact, known and experienced sorrow. She had tea with people who had lost grandparents and parents; she ate rice with folks who had lost husbands and wives, she listened to parents who felt helpless about the choices their children had made and were making and she prayed with other parents who didn’t even know where their children were. The hardest and yet somehow the most meaningful visits had been with those who had also lost a child or grandchild.

After several months, the woman returned to her village, her home, and her husband a changed woman. Her loss was real, but all her conversations, the friendships she had made, the connections established with others, had brought her perspective,

comfort, and made her more caring and compassionate. She had been a comfort to many of the people she met.

Her husband welcomed her home after all this time with a great big hug and he could tell just by how she walked and the look on her face that whatever task the Holy Man had given her had worked.

“So,” he said to his wife, “*what did the Holy Man have you do that helped you so much?*”

“*Oh my goodness!*” his wife said. “*The Holy Man, I forgot all about him!*” She ran all the way from her home to the Holy Man’s humble dwelling on the outskirts of the village & knocked quickly, as she caught her breath.

The Holy Man answered the door and seeing the woman standing there empty-handed he said to her with a knowing twinkle in his eye,

“*Where is my bowl of rice?*”

The woman replied with gratitude, “*I could not find a house that has never known sorrow. Everywhere I went, each person had a story of their loss, their heartache, their dear one who they missed. I could not find a house that has never known sorrow, but I did find comfort in the companions I met, as we cried and shared together.*” And the woman invited the Holy Man to join her and her husband for rice and more at her home, which he gladly did.

“*God does not comfort us to make us comfortable only, but to make us comforters.*” Dr. John Henry J. H. Jowett

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5,

“3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*”

Comfort is a comforting word – we even talk about “comfort food” that makes us feel good. Hannah Whitall Smith, the author of *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*, wrote:

“When as little children we have cuddled up into our mother’s lap after a fall or a misfortune, and have felt her dear arms around us, and her soft kisses on our hair, we have had comfort. When, as grown-up people, after a hard day’s work, we have put on our slippers and seated ourselves by the fire, in an easy chair with a book, we have had

comfort. When, after a painful illness, we have begun to recover, and have been able to stretch our limbs and open our eyes without pain, we have had comfort. When someone whom we dearly love has been ill almost unto death, and has been restored to us in health again, we have had comfort. A thousand times in our lives probably, have we said, with a sigh of relief, as a toil over or burdens laid down, Well, this is comfortable, and in that word comfortable there has been comprised more a rest, and relief, and satisfaction, and pleasure, than any other word in the English language could possibly be made to express. We cannot fail, therefore, to understand the meaning of this name of God, the God of all comfort.”

For high school football in Eastern Massachusetts, yesterday was the day for Superbowl games most taking place at Gillette Stadium, the home of the Patriots. This week's issue of Sports Illustrated included a story about Eunice Kennedy Shriver honoring her for her 40 years work as the founder of the movement we know as the Special Olympics. The combination of those things reminded me of an article Rick Reilly wrote in Sports Illustrated¹, some time ago called, The Play of the Year, about 17-year-old Jake Porter. “Jake can't read, can barely scrawl his first name. In three years on the Northwest High football team, in McDermott, Ohio, Jake had never run with the ball. Or made a tackle. He'd barely ever stepped on the field. That's about a right for a kid with chromosomal fragile X syndrome, a disorder that is a common cause of mental retardation. But everyday after school, Jake, who attends special-ed classes, races to Northwest team practices: football, basketball, track. Never plays, but seldom misses one.” One of the best players on the football team, a running back befriended Jake, taking time with him & even helping him learn how to tie his shoes.

Northwest's football coach & Jake's best friend, Dave Frantz, looked at the scheduled game against powerful Waverly High & had an idea. He called Waverly coach Derek Dewitt, & asked if the outcome of the game was settled, if on the last play, Jake Porter could get a handoff & immediately kneel down & end the game. Because of Jake's physical condition it is imperative that he not get tackled.

With five seconds left & Northwest losing to Waverly 42-0, Coach Frantz called timeout & came out to the center of the field to confirm the final play with Waverly's coach Derek Dewitt & the officiating crew. Fans could see there was a disagreement. Dewitt was shaking his head & waving his arms. After the ref stepped in, play resumed & Jake got the ball. He started to genuflect, as he'd practiced all week. Teammates

¹ Sports Illustrated, November 18, 2002.

stopped him & told him to run, but Jake started going in the wrong direction. The back judge rerouted him toward the line of scrimmage.

Suddenly, the Waverly defense parted like peasants for the king & urging Jake to go on his grinning sprint to the end zone. Imagine having 21 teammates on the field. In the stands mothers cried & fathers roared. Players on both sidelines held their helmets to the sky & whooped.

In the red-cheeked glee afterward, Jake's mom, Liz, a single parent & a waitress at a coffee shop, ran up to the 295-pound Dewitt to thank him. But she was so emotional, no words would come. Turns out that before the play Dewitt called his defense over & said, *"They're going to give the ball to number 45. Do not touch him! Open up a hole & let him score! Understand?"*

It's not the kind of thing you expect to come out of a football coach's mouth, but then Derek Dewitt is not your typical football coach. Originally from the Los Angeles area, he's the first black coach in the 57-year history of a conference made up of schools along the Ohio-Kentucky border. He's already heard the "n" word at two road games this season. Yet he was willing to give up his first shutout for a white kid he'd met only two hours earlier. Coach Frantz recalled, *"I told Derek before the play, 'This is the young man we talked about on the phone. He's just going to get the ball & take a knee.' But Derek kept saying, 'No, I want him to score.' I couldn't talk him out of it."* By the way, Dewitt & his team got their first shutout the next week 7-0.

Since the game, people in the two towns seem to be treating one another better. Dewitt says, *"I have this bully in one of my phys. ed. classes. He's a rough, out-for-himself type kid. The other day I saw him helping a couple of special-needs kids play basketball. I about fell over."*²

One of the blessings of the Christmas season is the reminder that God has come to us in Jesus to save us from our sins, and to comfort us when we feel weak or powerless to cope with our pain, grief, and distress

Isaiah concludes the magnificent 40th chapter with these words that give us comfort and hope when we are feeling weak and overwhelmed:

"28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

² Rick Reilly, Sports Illustrated, November, 18, 2002.

**30 Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
31 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”**

Prayer

“God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage (and comfort) the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory.” Augustine

**Blessing: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself & God our Father,
who loved us & through grace gave us eternal comfort & good hope, comfort your hearts & strengthen them in every good work & word.”**

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17