

The prophet Isaiah was given many different messages to speak to the people during his ministry. Some were calls to repentance, to return to the Lord. Other were declarations of God's just wrath against the people's great sin, warning them of what would happen if they refused to repent. And others were promises of peace and hope for the people, promises to save.

The words we heard today fall into that third category. And as we consider these words, we see an example of the Holy Spirit's ability to speak both to the people of that time and place and also to people of all times and places. The hope given through Isaiah to the people of Judah is also given to us.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Those hearing Isaiah speak these words for the first time around seven centuries before Christ's birth were in great need of comfort. Things had just continued going from bad to worse, one problem barely being solved and then two more taking its place.

The mighty Assyrian Empire, renowned for its violence and cruelty, had come down and crushed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, burning its cities, putting many of its people to the sword and hauling nearly everyone else away to be scattered throughout the distant lands of their empire.

And the Assyrians didn't stop with Israel. Scarcely had the dust and smoke settled than they're marching down into the Southern Kingdom of Judah. There, it seems a repeat of the north is inevitable. Even the great fortified cities of Judah fall to the Assyrians. Pillaging the countryside, the Assyrians besiege Jerusalem itself.

At the time, the king in Jerusalem is the godly Hezekiah. He was one of the most faithful of the kings of Judah, smashing idols and restoring the true worship of God in the land. Yet he appears to have been rewarded for his faithfulness by having most of his kingdom laid waste. The Assyrians take this opportunity to mock Hezekiah, declaring to those in Jerusalem that their king is only leading them to destruction.

And the Assyrians take it even further, mocking God Himself. They blasphemously declare that, just as none of the other gods had been able to save their own peoples, so too this Yahweh will be powerless before them.

Their land is captured, their cities burning, their king and their God mocked – can it get any worse? In a way, yes, yes it can! God doesn't abide the mockery of the Assyrians, but sends His angel, who slaughters the Assyrian army. The Assyrian king makes it back home, only to be murdered by his own sons in the temple of his false god.

It seems like things are going better, but then King Hezekiah falls ill and is told by the prophet Isaiah, "Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover." The kingdom is just barely back on its feet and now it's going to lose its faithful king. Hezekiah weeps and cries out to the Lord, and in mercy the Lord adds fifteen more years to his life.

Things seem okay once again, but after all that, you've got to imagine the people were more than a little gun-shy, just waiting and wondering: what else could go wrong?

It's to these people that the Lord speaks His tender words through Isaiah: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

To those nervous, exhausted, heartbroken people in Jerusalem, the Lord has given His promise that their warfare is over. The rest of Hezekiah's reign would be one of peace; no foreign armies would come again soon.

God had heard the cries of repentance, seen the sackcloth and ashes, and so He had pardoned their sins for the sake of the coming Messiah. And for all the destruction which the Lord had sent as punishment on the people's sins, He would restore them double. Their lands would again be fruitful, their cities rebuilt, their homes peaceful.

The greatest part of this comfort was found in something beyond even all these blessings. With the Lord giving them comfort and peace, the people didn't have to dwell on the present in fear, but could look to the future with hope. And not mere hope in getting to replant their fields and rebuild their houses, but hope in looking forward to the coming of God's Messiah.

This was the great promise that they had been looking toward since God had promised it to their father Abraham. This Messiah was the reason why they had been set apart by God as a unique people. And so once more they could look forward to this coming of the Lord, the revealing of His glory.

They could look at God's deliverance from the Assyrians as yet another instance of Him lifting up the valleys and making low the mountains and hills so that He could come. Their fear of conquest removed, they could once more rightly fear the Lord and seek to prepare His way through living in accord with His Word, that they might not be ashamed when His glory would be revealed. The mouth of the Lord had spoken, and so they had comfort and hope for the future.

This comfort, brought about by the Word spoken through the mouth of the Lord, would sustain the people even as time passed and the years took their toll. As Isaiah declared, "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass."

It would be many, many years before the Messiah would come. The generation to which Isaiah originally spoke, and the prophet himself, would all die, their bodies withering under the effects of sin. The whole Southern Kingdom, the city of Jerusalem, the temple of Solomon, all would be like grass blown away by the wind as the Lord brought judgment on sin. The people would go away into exile and then return to rebuild. The faithful in Judah would wait and watch as generation followed generation.

Yet as time marched on, they would still have hope, for as the prophet had said, "The Word of our God will stand forever." Kingdoms would rise and fall, generations would come and go, but God's promise that one day they would behold their God, this would never fade away.

Centuries after Isaiah, the people would indeed behold their God as He came in the flesh. He had promised, and now He was fulfilling His promise. The long-awaited Messiah was born of the Virgin to crush the serpent's head. The seed of Abraham had sprung forth to bring blessing to all nations. And with the coming of Jesus Christ, the fullness of Isaiah's prophecy, its truth for people of all times and places, would be revealed.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." With the coming of the Messiah, God's people are no longer the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, God's people are all who are adopted into God's household by being joined to His Son. The Israel of God is not one of bloodline, but one of promise. Our God desires to give His comfort to all, and He promises it to those who believe on His Son. We are His people; He is our God.

Like His people of old, we too are in need of His comfort. Our lives have all manner of troubles and frustrations. We have problems with our bodies, with our souls. We have conflicts with others, conflicts within ourselves.

These all stem from warfare in which we are constantly engaged. Its not a physical war like that which the Assyrians brought to Jerusalem. No, our struggle is not of flesh and blood, but against the present darkness of sin, death, and the devil.

This war may certainly seem like that siege of Jerusalem, with sin at times seeming to have us hemmed in on all sides, pressures to give in to temptation everywhere you go. And just as in sieges, the real danger is from within, traitors who would throw open the gates to the enemy – in our case, our own sinful flesh, which constantly pressures us to give in, to stop fighting and surrender to these powers, telling us that life will actually be much better under their rule.

Just as the Assyrians mocked Hezekiah and the Lord, so today do the worldly powers do the same. "Where is this God you worship?" "If He's so great, why do bad things still happen?" "It's 2023! Stop believing in your ancient fairy tales and get with the times!"

And then it so often seems that, the moment the pressure lets off and you think you can breath a little, another problem comes out of nowhere! You feel like Hezekiah, having withstood a siege one day and then being forced into a sickbed the next. On and on it goes!

To you, God's beloved people, He speaks and gives promises of comfort. It may seem like you are in constant battles, but the war has already been won. Jesus Christ defeated sin, death, and hell for you upon the cross.

Your warfare ended when He cried out, "It is finished!" Your iniquity was pardoned as He called out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The great evil general, the prince of darkness, has been cast down, crushed beneath that heel which he had driven a nail through.

Battles still go on in your life, but they are the dying spasms, the futile, desperate efforts of the defeated foe. Cling to Christ, and your victory cannot be taken from you. You will receive double from the Lord's nail-scarred hands, just as Isaiah said. He has taken your sins and given you righteousness. He has taken your death and given you life. He brought you from the domain of darkness and transferred you into the Kingdom of His beloved Son.

Because your Lord has done all this for you, you can know that He will not fail to bring about the fullness of His promises to you. Nothing in history has ever stopped His Kingdom from coming or His will from being done. Hills, valleys, mountains, those things in life that are completely immovable for us, He makes them completely flat and smooth as He comes to us.

And already He has put His Spirit within our hearts in Holy Baptism, enabling us to will and do those things that are pleasing to Him, to prepare the way for His coming. He leads us to repent of those sins that would stand between us and Him, to break down those walls that we would erect in His way.

By the Spirit's power, we are also led to proclaim His coming to others, to be like John the Baptist, pointing people to the Coming One, that they too might share in the incredible comfort we are given as His people.

Just like those ancient people of Judah, our comfort from God doesn't wither and fade with the passage of time. Isaiah died centuries before the Messiah revealed Himself, but nevertheless the prophet beheld his Savior when, according to the word, he was brought to the Zion of God along with all the saints. John the Baptist died in Herod's prison, never getting to see those works of Messiah with his own eyes, but nevertheless that faithful forerunner beholds the glory of Jesus in heaven.

You and I may not be alive on this earth when our Lord returns in might and glory. Our eyes may close in death long before Christ comes again. But nevertheless, we, and all who die believing in Jesus as Christ, will surely see the triumph of the Son of Man. Our Lord has spoken; His Word has been given, and nothing can change that.

We will be raised from our sleep in the dust when our Lord calls to us on the Last Day. We will see Him come in might, His reward and His recompense with Him. We will shout out with all the saints of every age, with the angels and archangels, that great cry of "Behold, our God!" Our King will bring us to the New Jerusalem, where we will dwell in peace, never again threatened by the warfare of sin and death.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Whatever happens in this life, you have comfort, for your God has promised it to you. As this world and its beauty wither and fade, know that the Word of our God, the Word made flesh, will stand forever. And as He stands, He will make all who are joined to Him stand as well. Your God speaks comfort to you, and the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

In Jesus' name, amen.