

ADVENT 2023

Part 2: “My One Comfort”

Isaiah 40:1–11

By David A. Ritchie

December 10, 2023 (The Second Sunday of Advent)

Summary

In this second week of Advent, we will delve into Isaiah 40. In our journey through this text, we will unpack the comforting attributes of God—grace, justice, power, wisdom, and infinity. Discover how understanding these attributes brings us hope and assurance, especially in times of weariness.

Scripture Reading

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: ‘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. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’ A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ 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. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:1-11, ESV).

The Collect

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly receive them, so that by patience and comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 92.

Introduction

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. And in the common lectionary of the church, the Old Testament readings for this Advent season come from the ancient Jewish prophet Isaiah.

Not unlike our own day and age, Isaiah lived in a time of great uncertainty, fear, and chaos [show painting of **Isaiah by Michelangelo**]. As a boy, Isaiah grew up during the last golden age of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. But as he grew older, the brutal and mighty empire of Assyria rose to power and terrorized and conquered the peoples of the ancient Near East.

During this time of great anxiety and unrest, it felt as if the ground was breaking and shaking beneath the people of God. They were tempted to put all their hope and trust in the kingdoms of men and earthly powers to save them. But in this moment, Isaiah was able to behold a vision of God's glory that gave both him and the people of God hope despite the darkness and chaos that surrounded them.

Chapter 40 is the hinge chapter in Isaiah's long, sprawling prophetic book. If you were to read Isaiah chapters 1—39, you would see Isaiah primarily as a prophet who confronts. He confronts the people of his own age for their idolatry and injustice. He confronts their insincere lip service to God and their half-hearted devotion. And he foretells that judgment and exile will come upon the people of God for their sins.

But when we come to chapter 40, there is a sudden change of tone. Isaiah's message becomes one of comfort and hope. In fact, even the audience of Isaiah's prophecy has changed. He is now writing to future generations of God's people—a people who are enduring suffering, sorrow, and exile from home. And he is giving them a vision of restoration. That's why this chapter begins with the words: "**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God**" (Isa 40:1)

For centuries, the people of Israel and Judah had sought to find their comfort in the kings and kingdoms of men. But now, God has taken away their kings, and the kingdoms of men have only been a source of tyranny, oppression, and seduction to sin. It is time for the people of God to turn to the one true comfort.

And what is the comfort that Isaiah offers? It is the comfort of knowing the reality of God. Isaiah spends the whole of chapter 40 cataloging the truths of various attributes (or characteristics) of God.

Isaiah wants the people of God to see what he sees. He wants them to know and trust the God whose kingdom is coming—the God for whom we yearn in the season of Advent.

Like God's people in the ancient world, we, too, can fall prey to a vision of God that is far too small. But when we allow the words of God's Scripture to shine into our hearts—

when we look to God for who he has revealed himself to be—we will find that he indeed is **“Our One Comfort.”**

So, for the rest of our time, we will look at five crucial attributes of God that are taught here in Isaiah 40, and we are going to show how those attributes give us comfort in our time of waiting.

Exposition

1.) God is gracious

Isaiah 40 is written to a people who have experienced suffering and pain. They have sinned and borne the consequences of their sin. They have lost their land, their temple, and their kingdom. They have endured the shame of being under the tyranny of foreign rule.

But now, God announces that the time of judgment has ended. The time of warfare is over. God speaks through his prophet and proclaims, **“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins”** (Isa 40:1–2).

God has made a way to end the power of evil without ending his people. God has made a way for the penalty of sin to be paid, but in a way that does not require the death of his people.

In the Old Testament, judgment could only be deferred by the regular sacrifices of animals who died in the place of sinners. But Isaiah seems to point beyond the temple sacrifices of the Old Testament law. He points to a day when all iniquity is pardoned and all sins are forgiven—*forever!*

Isaiah only saw in part, but we now see in full. For Christ has come to make the ultimate sacrifice to end all sacrifices. For though he was perfectly righteous, he took the penalty our rebellion against God. The power of sin has ended, and the day of grace and forgiveness has dawned.

Maybe you struggle with a constant temptation to feel unworthy or unlovable. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by guilt and regret. Maybe you feel attacked thoughts of shame and self-hatred.

If that is you, you need to know that because Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, you too can have hope that your warfare has ended and your iniquity is pardoned. For those that trust in Christ, we can know the throne of God is no longer a throne of judgment—it is a throne of grace (Heb 4:16).

Isaiah is saying if you want to know true comfort, there is no greater comfort than knowing that you have been loved by God at your very worst. You have been loved with a

love that cannot be earned by human effort. It is a love that can only be gratefully received with the open hands of faith.

If we are ever to have a true hope of knowing God, trusting God, loving God, and living for God, we must first believe that he is a God who has saved us by grace and grace alone.

As the great protestant reformer, John Calvin once wrote: *“...man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God’s grace.”*²

2.) God is just

In the ancient world, whenever a king would ride into a city, he was often preceded by heralds who commanded the people of a city to prepare and make way for his arrival. All the people who stood on the main city road and markets were to stand aside to clear the way for the king to ride through. Whether you were rich or poor, young or old, powerful or powerless, all were commanded to take a step back and acknowledge the authority of the king.

Isaiah takes this ancient image to show the surpassing wonder of God's coming kingdom. He says that there is a king who is coming that is so glorious that not only will the people of busy city streets need to make way, the mountains themselves will step aside and bow down to his authority.

Isaiah says: *“A voice cries: ‘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. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken’”* (Isa 40:3–5).

This is not just any king—this is the rightful sovereign over all creation. And when he comes, all creation will be set to rights. The uneven places will be leveled. The prideful will be humbled. The lowly will be lifted up. God’s good creation will be restored, for the perfect judge will come and bring forth perfect justice. And make no mistake, our world needs justice.

The Bible teaches us that when sin entered into the world, God’s good creation was fractured. There is a deep knowledge within every human heart that the world is not as it should be; that it is broken. And that brokenness is certainly manifest in individual lives. But even more, that brokenness is also evidenced in human culture and the systems of society.

This is why governmental systems can be used to promote oppression for the powerful instead of promoting justice for all. This is why economic structures can be used to

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 594.

promote the greed of the uber-wealthy instead of promoting flourishing for all. This is why academic institutions can be used to promote the ideology of the elite instead of promoting a pursuit of knowledge for all. This is why even the church can tragically promote worldliness and self-interested heresy instead of preaching the truth of the gospel. All of these examples are fundamental forms of what we would rightly call “injustice.”

Now, I know that whenever the words like “justice” or “injustice” are mentioned, people can get nervous or suspicious. In our culture, justice is often heard as a strictly political word. But justice is a word that the Old Testament prophets talk about a lot. Justice is a topic the Bible talks about a lot. Justice is something God cares about a lot because injustice is an enduring reality of a world broken by sin.

We do live in a world where the most greedy often profiteer off of the most poor and where the most powerful acquire greater influence through bullying the weak. There are groups of people who tend to bear the brunt of such oppression; people like widows and orphans and sojourners who have been uprooted and exiled to a land that is not their own. These are the people who are the most vulnerable to those who would take advantage of them.

But the Bible tells us that they are also people who God cares about deeply and for whom he will rise up to defend, vindicate, and bring wrathful justice upon those who wrong them (see: Isa 58).

So, for the poorest of the global poor, and for the millions of people who are in situations of inescapable poverty due to injustice (many of which are our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ), the promise of God’s justice gives comfort indeed. So too, if you have ever been bullied or taken advantage of, the truth that God is just can give your heart peace and hope as well.

For there is a day that is coming when all tyranny, greed, and oppression will be brought to an end. The wicked and the violent will be held to account. And King Jesus will make right all that is wrong.

Interestingly, this lens of God’s justice gives us some fascinating insight into Jesus’s earthly ministry. When Jesus began his ministry, he declared that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15). And then, he validated that claim by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and delivering people from demonic oppression.

But in his book *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller argues that these miracles were not random displays of power; they were also glimpses of true justice. Jesus’s miracles, in other words, were meant to give us the comforting hope of his just kingdom that is coming.

Keller writes, “Jesus’s miracles...were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce...Instead, he used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead. Why? We modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural

order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order. The Bible tells us that God did not originally make the world to have disease, hunger, and death in it. Jesus has come to redeem where it is wrong and heal the world where it is broken. His miracles are not just proofs that he has power but also wonderful foretastes of what he is going to do with that power. Jesus's miracles are not just a challenge to our minds, but a promise to our hearts, that the world we all want is coming.”³

3.) God is powerful

It is certainly encouraging to know that God is gracious and just. This means that he is truly a good God. But a God that is only good is not *good enough*. God must also be powerful.

That's why in this next section, Isaiah contrasts the frailty and fleetingness of men and women with the eternal power and might of God. Mankind is like grass that will wither, and a flower that will fade (Isa 40:7). But "the word of our God will stand forever" (Isa 40:8).

Our God is a God of “might” (קִיָּוָה) (Isa 40:10). As Isaiah will say later on in verse 12, *“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?”* (Isa 40:12).

Think about this for a moment. There are 362 trillion gallons of water on earth. God is big enough and powerful enough to fit this in the hollow of his hand, Isaiah says. The observable universe measures 93 billion lightyears wide. Yet, this vast expanse is smaller than the span of God's outstretched arms.

Obviously, Isaiah is not trying to give us literal dimensions to God's size, as if he were a physical entity within creation. Rather, Isaiah is trying to give us a glimpse of the unfathomable bigness and the endless power of the God we serve.

Now, such absolute power might be a fearsome reality. And we should certainly worship God with an awestruck wonder that the Bible elsewhere describes as the “fear of the Lord.” But we should not be troubled that God possesses such power. For the one who is infinitely powerful is also infinitely good.

In fact, Isaiah tells us that the Lord will channel this gloriously unimaginable power toward loving and leading his people, as a good shepherd cares for his sheep. Look at verse eleven: *“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young”* (Isa 40:11).

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, 77.

You need to know this comfort: the shepherd who walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23:4) is a God of unbounded power. The shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one is a God of unfathomable might (Luke 15:1–7).

Absolute power is only scary if the one who holds it is not absolutely good. But our God is absolutely powerful and absolutely good. And that is the best news imaginable.

4.) God is wise

Remember, the audience that Isaiah 40 is geared toward is the Jewish people in exile. It is an audience who has suffered great personal loss. When we endure such suffering, it is common and understandable to ask God, “Why? Why would you allow this to happen?”

To such questions, Isaiah responds, *“Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?”* (Isa 40:13–14).

Here, Isaiah is reminding us of the wisdom of God. He is reminding us that we can only view our reality from a limited vantage point. We did not witness the beginning of creation and we do not know the end of history. But God possesses no such limitation of knowledge. That means that God can possess reasons for what he does and does not allow that we could never know or understand. We cannot fathom the wisdom of God, but we can learn to trust it.

I remember when my son was three years old, playing in the backyard, and he attempted to climb our wooden fence. Thankfully, he wasn't able to make it over the fence, but he did succeed in lodging a massive wooden splinter in his hand, just beneath his thumb. He wept at the pain, but he wept even more when I told him I was going to have to dig and press the splinter out of his hand.

Even though his mind could not possibly understand what was happening in that moment, I knew the only way I could save him from an even greater problem and an even greater pain was to wound him. And he frantically raged against my wife and me, as my wife held him while I forced the shard of wood from his body.

But I wasn't angry at him for his weeping or fear and pain. Yet I remember longing for the day when he would be capable of trusting that his father despite the pain and fear of the moment.

So too, we will endure great pain and hardship as the people of God. At times, we will be called to suffer with and for Christ. But we can draw comfort from the fact that our God is perfectly wise. And even when we cannot conceive or understand the meaning of suffering and sorrow, we can trust that he is bending history to his glory and our good.

5.) God is infinite

The chapter of Isaiah 40 ends with these words: *“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. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they 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”* (Isa 40:28–31).

As we approach the end of a year in an increasingly anxious and exhausted culture, I think there is not a person listening to this sermon who does not relate to feelings of weariness. We’ve all probably can think of moments when we reached our limit and then some. Even young people have a limit to strength and energy, Isaiah says. But our God cannot be exhausted. He possesses no limitations.

We are finite. He is infinite!

The attribute of God’s infinity amplifies all his other attributes described here by Isaiah. God is not only gracious—he is infinitely gracious. God is not only just—he is infinitely just. He is infinitely powerful. He is infinitely wise.

We will be exhausted if all we can do is take matters into our own hands and white-knuckle our way through life. But we will find our strength and restoration when we rest in the infinite strength of our God.

This is good news; good news that must be celebrated and proclaimed and believed in. That is why the prophet declares, *“Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”* (Isa 40:9).

You see, that’s the difference between good news and good advice. Good advice is about what you can do. Good news is about who God is and what God has done. And all can do with good news is proclaim it, celebrate it, and most importantly, believe it.

What would your life look like if you believed what Isaiah has said to be true about our God? What joy would you experience? What peace would you know?

Conclusion

Years after the prophet Isaiah lived and died, the words of Isaiah 40 began to take on new and profound meaning as a man named John began to preach in the Judean wilderness. As a voice of one who cried out in the wilderness, he prepared the way, as he called the people of God to repentance, baptized them in the Jordan River, and announced God was sending someone far greater and far mightier than he [show [Icon of the Baptism of Christ](#)].

And when Jesus of Nazareth stepped forward to be baptized by John, John said to the crowds, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

For Jesus Christ is the living embodiment of the God Isaiah 40 reveals.

Do you feel burdened by shame and guilt? Jesus is the Lamb of God who took your sin so that you could receive God's grace

Do you feel like you have been wronged? Jesus is the Judge who is coming to bring forth perfect justice. He will be your vindication.

Do you feel overwhelmed and anxious and like you don't have the answers? Jesus is the wisdom of God, the word of God, and the very incarnation of truth. You can trust him.

Do you feel weak and weary? Jesus is the one who calms the storm by the power of his word! He possesses all power and might, and wields that power for our redemption.

Do you feel insufficient and not enough? Jesus is the God who is infinite! He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Rev 22:13)!

If we can truly believe who God has revealed himself to be, we can know rest. We can know hope. We can know a spiritual comfort that is not contingent on ever-changing circumstances.

As the words of the old Heidelberg Catechism teach: *"What is thy only comfort in life and in death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me, that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by His Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him."*⁴

Redeemer Christian Church, as we continue to walk through this Advent season, may embrace this comfort together. May we yearn for the fulfillment of all our God has promised. May we await our coming King with faith and faithfulness.

AMEN.

⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, *Heidelberg Catechism*, Revised Edition. (Cleveland, OH: Central Publishing House, 1907), 19.

Discussion starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) Read Isa 40:1–11. If you have the time, consider reading all of chapter 40. As you read this passage, take some time to list and discuss the various attributes (or characteristics) of God that Isaiah describes.
- 2.) What is the connection between the “comfort” in Isaiah 40:1 and the attributes of God listed in the rest of the chapter?
- 3.) Is there a particular attribute of God found in Isaiah 40 that gives you a sense of comfort in this season?
- 4.) Is there a particular attribute of God found in Isaiah 40 that you struggle to believe?