

+ Advent 2 + Sermon preached by Pastor Curt S. Backhaus.
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Isaiah 40:1-11 | EHV

Mom was in the living room watching TV, folding laundry, and talking on the telephone. The two kids were downstairs, playing in the rec room.

At least that's where she thought they were. The older brother was a little oblivious –completely absorbed in one of his video games-- so he never saw his sister leave the room and head back upstairs. Mom didn't see her either...

..as she snuck past the sofa and headed to the kitchen at the other end of the house. Oh, how she loved to play in the kitchen, pretending she was cooking supper, baking cupcakes, getting ready to entertain everyone. The little girl had a ball. And she tried to be really quiet so Mom or her brother wouldn't spoil her fun.

But then the smoke alarm went off! Mom rushed into the kitchen. The little girl was covered head to toe in flour. And a Tupperware pie carrier was half-melted into one of the burners on the stove. "Honey! What did I tell you?"

"You told me not to play with any of those knobs but I forgot!"

"Go to your room right this very minute!"

The little girl ran off crying all the way. Her mother was angry and frightened. Her daughter hadn't listened to her and almost started a fire! She spent a good hour cleaning up the kitchen. And as she was close to finishing up, she sent the girl's older brother with instructions to ask his sister to come back to the kitchen.

Her brother went upstairs but then came back and said, "She doesn't want to come out, Mom. She's afraid you're still mad at her."

So she sent him back again. "Tell your sister that I love her, that I forgive her and that I'll be there as soon as I'm done and I'll give her a big hug."

Maybe that little scenario will help you understand today's Old Testament lesson. God's prophets, here Isaiah, then the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist, were like that older brother bringing messages of hope and forgiveness to God's people. The word God asked them to deliver was this:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call out to her.

Her warfare really is over.

Her guilt is fully paid for.

Yes, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice is calling out:

In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.

In the wasteland make a level highway for our God.

Every valley will be raised up,

and every mountain and hill will be made low.

The rugged ground will become level,

and the rough places will become a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

and all flesh together will see it.

70 years earlier, the people of Judea had witnessed God's righteous anger over their sin and rebellion. Foreign armies wiped out their nation, deposed their king, destroyed their Temple and dragged them off to Babylon in chains.

They had felt the brunt of God's wrath. They were convinced God was still mad at them. They could still hear his words of condemnation ringing in their ears, troubling their consciences, weighing them down with guilt and shame, leaving them trembling:

*All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like a wildflower in the countryside.
Grass withers, flowers fade,
when the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Yes, the people are grass.
Grass withers, flowers fade,
but the Word of our God endures forever.*

You've been there, too, haven't you? Convicted by your own conscience, convinced by the consequences of your sin, tormented by the devil's incessant accusations—all of them telling you in dreadful dissonance, "There is no way God could ever love you or forgive you! That will never happen!" It's a spiritual wasteland—where you feel isolated, lost and alone.

But then comes the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Like that older brother, standing right outside his sister's door, telling her, "Get ready! Mom's coming! I can hear her walking up the stairs! And you're going to love it when she gets here because she's smiling, and she's bringing you something...!"

*Get up on a high mountain,
O Zion, you herald of good news.
Lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, you herald of good news.
Lift it up! Do not be afraid!
Say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
Look, God the Lord will come with strength,
and his arm is ruling for him.
Look, his reward is with him.
The result of his work is in front of him.
Like a shepherd he will care for his flock.
With his arm he will gather the lambs.
He will lift them up on his lap.
He will gently lead the nursing mothers.*

The little girl opened the door timidly, to find her Mom there, ready with a hug. "I'm sorry for disobeying you," the little girl said. "I forgive you," her Mom said. And as she invited her daughter to go back down to the kitchen to help her make cupcakes, she pulled out a couple spoons and a container of chocolate frosting, and said with a smile, "This time, let's lick the frosting off the spoons first!"

God not only loved his Old Testament people and brought them out of captivity and back to their Promised Land. Better than that, he also sent them their long-awaited Messiah.

God's words of comfort weren't meant just for Isaiah's contemporaries, but for all people—including you and me. He sends his heralds of good news, prophets, preachers, good Christian friends and even an entire company of angels at Christmastime to proclaim the glory of the Lord, "Do not be afraid! I bring you glad tidings of great joy that will be for all the people! A Savior has been born to you! He is Christ the Lord!"

God himself comes in the flesh to provide and prove our forgiveness. He joins his holy life to ours in baptism. Again and again, he reassures us of his love in words of absolution in response to our repentance and with the promises of peace in his Holy Supper, "Your guilt really is paid for!" And then Jesus continues to rule in our hearts with his love and guide our lives with the tender care of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us to reconcile us to God. He carries us close in his strong arms, and brings us home to the glories of heaven. Amen.