

I want to think about the word comfort with you this morning. It's a word that conveys a really layered meaning. It can bring feelings of warmth, security, peace. A while back, I was preaching on the topic of comfort at a young adults retreat, and I did a bit of an exercise this morning with them – while we were having breakfast, I went around and asked some of them: what are things that bring them comfort? Here were some of the answers I got:

- Family/friends/pets/significant others
- Bed/sleep
- Food
- Warm drink
- Support systems in place
- Places of safety/community/familiarity
- My favourite answer: a glass of whiskey on a cold snowy Friday night.

All of those things were things that bring a sense of comfort, to some extent. We live in a world where comfort, on some level, is easy to come by.

Unfortunately, we live in a world where comfort is also, at times, hard to find. If you turn on the news, there's no shortage of things that we find are causing a lack of comfort. Wildfires in British Columbia have torched the Kelowna area. At last count, nearly 200 properties had been either partially or completely destroyed. The fires in Hawaii have

been, by the numbers, even more devastating – affecting thousands of buildings and taking over a hundred lives. There was a shooting in a dollar store in Jacksonville, Florida last week, motivated by racial hatred, that took three lives. Inflation continues to hammer away at people's financial resources – and as we see so often, it's the poor who are being hit hardest. That's not to mention everything else that's going on in the world right now: the turmoil in places like Ukraine, Ethiopia, and Niger is not only costing people their homes, but their lives.

And look, the lack of comfort isn't just due to things that make headlines and breaking news reels. We deal with things every day that impact us, and leave us longing for comfort. It could be health related, it could be work related, it could be school, it could be family. There are all kinds of things that could damage our comfort, or make it difficult to find comfort. With our readings today, I want to take us back in time to two places where comfort was a tough thing to come by. I want to show us how God has assured us and promises us comfort in our dark times. We're going to sit in two very different times, and we're going to see together how God has been faithful then, and how we can be assured that he is faithful now.

In the previous chapter, Isaiah 39, we read about a dire pronouncement made by Isaiah regarding the future of the land of Judah. Judah has just weathered two potential catastrophes, both by a miraculous work of God. The first of those involved the armies of

Sennacherib, king of Assyria. He marched on Jerusalem, besieged it, and bragged about his plans to kill or enslave every single one of the people living there. God intervenes in an extraordinary way, striking down 185,000 Assyrians and delivering Jerusalem from Sennacherib, who flees back to Assyria and is murdered there. The second of these is God making Hezekiah well from an illness that would have otherwise killed him, leaving the country in control of his wicked and unjust son, Manassah. Hearing about these events, diplomats come to visit Hezekiah from the then far-off country of Babylon, seemingly to inquire about his health and the state of his country. Hezekiah gives them a tour, showing off all the splendour of the temple, the treasury, the military. After they leave, Isaiah is sent to Hezekiah to give a message: nothing that you have shown them will remain in Judah. All of it, in the future, will be carried off to Babylon, and your people will serve their kings.

It's in that context that this book starts looking forward to this time that this particular chapter is written. We know, of course, from looking back at history and from Scripture that Judah was conquered and plundered. Her people were carried off into exile, the temple was looted and destroyed. Everything that Hezekiah had shown the Babylonian messengers wound up in Babylonian hands. The temple – the house of their God – had been knocked to the ground. This all happens, it should be mentioned again, well into the future, beyond the actual time that Isaiah is preaching to the people of Judah. By the time the exile happens,

Isaiah is long dead. But the words ring out loud and clear, down through the decades of intervening time, and as the people of Judah are led off into exile, they can be assured that this is not forever.

Let's put ourselves in the shoes of the Hebrews being led off into exile. They have endured as a people through so much. God brought them out of Egypt, brought them through the wilderness, and brought them to the land of Canaan, brought them through the time of the judges, into the time of Saul and David, the only kings of the unified Israel, before the split in the time of David's son Rehoboam. He brought Judah through each of its kings, both good and bad. Even as the northern tribes of Israel were overwhelmed and brought into exile by the same Assyrians that God so miraculously struck down outside the walls of Jerusalem, the people of Judah had the temple, they had the line of David on the throne, so they would probably have felt that they had God on their side; and if God was on their side, they could not fall – no matter how closely they followed – or didn't follow – his commands. How humbling it would have been, then, to be led away to exile – the temple destroyed, the ark of the covenant lost, everything you owned in the hands of people who had no appreciation for its true value. It's to those people that Isaiah speaks in our passage this morning.

“‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God.’ Those few words – and in fact, the first couple of verses – point to a truth that Isaiah is letting Israel understand here: this exile will not last forever. You will

not be abandoned to your captors and left to die in a land foreign to you, so don't lose hope. This exile is not meant to destroy you. There will be a day where you return. Isaiah then gives us words that are later quoted about John the Baptist: a voice of one calling: in the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. The gospel of Mark references this section directly when it talks about John, but that wouldn't have meant much to the Hebrews hearing Isaiah's words. What it would have meant for them was a continuation of that theme of comfort, comfort, my people: God is coming. He will do great things. He will show his glory. He will bring hope.

That's the same theme that John the Baptist would later bring in his ministry, in the time before Christ began his earthly ministry. Mark 1:4 says this: And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. If we go on to verse 7, Mark continues with these words: And this was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' Comfort, comfort, my people. The Lord is among you, God is with you, Immanuel – God with us – has come.

But as we come back to Israel, exiled and afraid and comfortless, we find this question: how can we be sure that this will happen? This is a big deal! These are big people, with big armies and massive power! How

will you do this? To which God tells the prophet to cry out: “All people are like grass, and their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass fades and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” I raised you up, says God. On your own you are feeble, you are like a mist, like grass that is here today and gone tomorrow; like flowers that hold incredible beauty one day and are dead the next; but I raised you up. Now, you are weak. But in the face of God's power, so are your captors. It is true that the Hebrew people are like grass, but it is also true that the Babylonians are like grass. If and when God does decide to bring his people back from exile, there is nothing that even the strongest king of Babylon could do to prevent it. There is no permanence in human things, but if God speaks a promise, that word will stand – and no force in heaven, hell, or earth will change that.

In a sense, this very church, among many others, is evidence of that. It's why Reformation Day is such a significant day for us. Most of us know the history but let's go through it briefly. The Catholic church, in an effort to bring in money, began selling what it called indulgences. If you give enough money, they said, you can be guaranteed that you will earn eternal life. Not only that, if you give enough money, you can be assured that your relatives can also be free of their time in purgatory and will then go to heaven, to eternal life. So people would travel for

days to buy these things. It was basically exactly how the prosperity gospel works today, only with different bait for the hook. Today, of course, these prosperity preachers tell us that if we give what we have to the work of their church – note that their pockets and their churches have some significant overlap – that those who give much will see that money come flying into their pockets too. The more money you give, the more money God will give you, because apparently those are the rules. I haven't seen that anywhere in my Bible, but hey. But back then, instead of selling material happiness and inflated bank accounts, these particular prosperity preachers were trying to sell something far less tangible: comfort. They were trying to sell comfort in the assurance that you would go to heaven for giving the amount they wanted you to give. They wanted to sell comfort for you on behalf of your loved ones. And all of it was a sham, a charade, a way of plundering the people they were supposed to be serving. So on that day in 1517, October 31st, one monk elected not to go along with it, nailing a document to the door of the local church in Wittenburg, Germany. The majority of the church was going along with it, accepting this as common practice. But in the face of all of that, in the face of the leadership of the church attempting to force him to recant, in the face of the Holy Roman Emperor issuing an edict basically telling anyone who saw this man to shoot on sight, he did not recant. That monk's name, of course, was Martin Luther, and he saw what Isaiah was telling Israel in this passage: that comfort comes from

God. Comfort doesn't come from having a little slip of paper that says that you've paid enough money that you no longer owe God any debt; comfort comes from the one who came and lived and bled and died and rose again to pay the price and clear our debt.

And that's a big part of why the Heidelberg Catechism, which sprang out of this Reformation, starts with this question: What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own; but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil." This is a document that was first published in 1563, not even fifty years after Luther's initial protest in Wittenburg. For the writers of the Catechism, it was absolutely critical that they address this point. Your true comfort is not found in the money you give, your possessions, or even your good deeds. It's found in Christ and his work.

"He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven." Obvious hair-related jokes aside, this too is a wonderful promise from God – a promise of comfort, even the most comfortless times. Especially since it comes from the God who can spend so much of our passage from Isaiah this morning assuring the captive people of Judah that he is in control! "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of



the earth in a basket or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in the balance?" We kind of bookended these verses this morning, but I encourage you, when you have a moment today – take out your Bible, and read the whole of this passage. These verses, from verse 12 through verse 26, are packed full of illustrations and examples and rhetorical questions that point to the main idea: God is in control, so take comfort! There aren't enough trees in all the world to burn offerings to properly worship God. There aren't enough animals in all the world to sacrifice in order to atone for all our sins. Idols? They're just images, made of wood and stone and dressed up with gold and precious metals – but how can the creator worship the created thing? There's no way we can properly make an image of God, a reality reflected in the Second Commandment. But he is high and exalted, he sits above the nations – even the one that has you in their grasp – and he rules them. "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing." That's the God who loves you! That's the God who watches over you.

"Because I belong to him, Christ, by his holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." The people of Judah and Jerusalem are in anguish. They're being led away into captivity and exile. They're being led away

from so many of the things that have made them, y'know, them! And to them, Isaiah directs these words to reassure them that God is in control: "Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." When you are at your lowest, weakest, and most not-comforted, your God is there with you. And we know, from later readings in the Old Testament, that God does indeed bring his people back from exile.

That's the same comfort and assurance offered to us: that in our weakest and darkest moments, God's promises of comfort and strength are for us, too. We are assured of life with Him. He will bring us as his people out the other side. In a world where so many people are chasing comfort, God gives it freely. To be sure, it's not always an easy comfort! The Christian life, one that is wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him, will occasionally require some difficulty. And look, I know that there are a wide variety of people here this morning and more watching on the livestream. I can't speak to each of your

individual struggles because I don't know them all! I know some, for sure, but I don't know all of them. But take comfort in the fact that God does. And that when even the youngest and strongest of us are beaten, and battered, and broken down, that God will and does renew the strength of his people. That doesn't mean it's going to get magically better right away – Judah was in exile for quite a while! It does give us a sure and certain hope that the God who created the heavens and the earth, who created galaxies and planets that we have yet to touch or see or explore, who is above everyone and everything, loves us.

Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God. Amen.