

Natalie W. Bell
 December 6, 2020
 2nd Sunday Advent

Christmas Comfort
Isaiah 40:1-11

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.*

⁵ *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.*

⁹ *Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;^[a]
 lift up your voice with strength,*

*O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,^[b] 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.*

For me, it's ***not Thanksgiving*** without
 turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy.
 And it's ***not Christmas*** without a tree, a nativity set,
 candlelight, and of course—some music from Handel's *Messiah*.

I love to **listen to the *Messiah*** while decorating the Christmas tree.
 It just makes it feel like Christmas.

What makes it *feel like Christmas* to you?
 What's your favorite *food*?
 What are your favorite Christmas *traditions*?

I think we all want to have some of the *comforts* of Christmas.
 Especially this year—during the COVID pandemic.
 Especially when so much has happened in our country and our world.

The *prophet Isaiah* knew how much we need God's comfort.
 All throughout his writings, we hear the words from God,
 comfort, comfort my people.

In fact, Handel's *Messiah* begins with the opening words of Isaiah 40—
Comfort ye, Comfort ye my people....

Isaiah was speaking to the *people exiled in Babylon*.
 The people of Israel had been conquered,
 and forcibly removed from their home.
 Their temple had been destroyed and their homeland decimated.

They felt that life as they knew it—was over.
 Certainly their *way of worship and faith* seemed over.

I think it's hard for us to *imagine how these exiles felt*.
 It would be like stepping into the shoes of a refugee,
 or someone enslaved in human trafficking.
 It was a horrible circumstance, often hopeless.

And it was to *that context* that Isaiah spoke about comfort.
 I suspect many people were skeptical.
 But then they heard more from the prophet.

Did you know that some of Isaiah's words of comfort
 were the *most searched and bookmarked verses* in the Bible app in 2020?

The most *searched, read and bookmarked verse* of 2020 in the United States from the YouVersion Bible App was *Isaiah 41:10*: “*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*”

People this year really turned to the Bible for comfort.

Bible searches also spiked with major events.

The word “***fear***” was the top searched term in first few months of the year on the Bible App.

Then the word “***justice***” was top in the spring, and “***healing***” was popular throughout 2020.

The Bible Gateway site saw similar search trends.

Verses about God taking away sickness got around 90 times more queries than average when the U.S. COVID-19 lockdowns began in March.

The site also saw searches related to racism, justice, and oppression spike to 100 times the average in the week following George Floyd’s death.

Kate Shellnutt, *Christianity Today.com*; “2020s Most Read Bible Verse: Do Not Fear”. December 3, 2020

Comfort comes through God’s word in amazing and powerful ways.

We hear it from the Bible like no other book, right?

It’s something nothing else can provide.

What are some of your most comforting Bible verses?

Where do you go to in God’s Word for hope and peace?

Do you go to Isaiah?

What about The Psalms? Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd..*

What about Jeremiah 29:11: *I know the plans I have for you....*

Or Jesus’ own words? John 11:25: *I am the resurrection and the life...*

Or John 16:33: *I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

There are literally ***thousands of verses of comfort and peace in the Bible,***

Just waiting for us to draw upon them, like drawing water from a well!

They are words that can ***quench*** our thirsty souls.

And the prophet ***Isaiah is a master*** at providing such words of ***comfort.***

While some of the other prophets

emphasize the unfaithfulness of God’s people that led to the exile,

Isaiah focuses on the comfort the people need ***during*** exile.

Isaiah wants to remind them that exile is not forever, and ***God will restore them.***

So Isaiah 40 begins like a ***heavenly courtroom scene---***

where God says these people have paid for their sins,

and now they ***deserve comfort***.

Jessica Miller Kelley, editor. *Every Valley: Advent with the Scriptures of Handel's Messiah*. WJK: Louisville, 2014. Pg. 5

And what is this comfort like?

It's like a ***shepherd*** who feeds his flock;
 who will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them close to his heart,
 and gently lead the mother sheep.

This comfort is also a time of preparation.

Isaiah says 'prepare the way of the Lord'.
 We read it and hear about the coming of the Messiah.
 But at the time it was an even more immediate comfort.
 His comfort was to get the people ***ready***—for their restoration from exile,
 AND the day when God would make ALL things right.
 The coming of the Savior.

Which is just like our Advent season.

Advent is the season where we prepare our hearts,
 for Christ's birth on December 25th.
 And Christ's return at the end of all time.

Advent is when we prepare our hearts
For who Jesus is and what Jesus does in our lives.

Do you know how ***Jesus identified himself***,
 when John asked ***'are you the one, or shall we wait for another?'***....
 he said, tell him, *the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,*
the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them. "

Jesus is a Savior who brings comfort, and hope.

He showed that in all of his ministry on earth.
 This is the same Savior who lives in our hearts and lives today,
 through the Holy Spirit.
 The one John describes in his Gospel
 as our Advocate, our Counselor, and our Comforter.

Our God is a *God of comfort*.

Paul says this in *2 Corinthians 1:3-4*:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

This comfort is for us right now—TODAY.

But it is also the comfort we will all know *in the end*.

Because we are not just waiting on Christmas,

We are waiting for Jesus *to come back*.

We are waiting on the day when he will make all things new,

And wipe away every tear,

And restore everything that is broken.

That is something we all need to *hear*.

And we all need to *look forward to*, isn't it?

Because Christmas in 2020 isn't going to be easy.

It is a *wonderful time of year, especially for Christians*.

And yet at the same time it is the *hardest* time of year.

Christmas, especially this year, is a *reminder* of all our hurts and sorrows.

It is a time when we are keenly aware of everything that's *wrong* in our world.

At Christmas we are *missing* those who are sick,

And *grieving* those who have passed away.

Many of us will not see our loved ones, at least not like usual.

We may be connecting via computer instead of around a dining room table.

We could all use some *comfort* this Christmas!

And somewhere, somehow,

we need to *celebrate the birth* of Jesus.

Somewhere right in the middle of our brokenness,

We need to remember a night long ago,

When a tiny baby was born who would take our brokenness and make us whole....

In the *middle of our sorrow* and chaos,

We need his good news, and new life.

We need his comfort, and so much more.

Today in the Gospel of John, we heard these words:
And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.
 The Word of God—Jesus Christ—became one of us.
 He lived with us.
 He brought new life to us.
 Talk about a message of ***comfort and hope!***

We all need divine comfort.

We all need some ***Christmas hope***—something more powerful than any cards, gifts, dinners, or gatherings.
 Something that can sustain us,
 and carry us through the darkest times.
 For these ARE dark times.

And when we receive God's comfort—
It's not just something we keep for ourselves.
 Have you ever received such good news, that you just couldn't wait to share it?
 Don't you think God's comfort is like that?

What if it's meant to be ***received, and then passed on*** to those around us?
 Once it sinks into our hearts,
 What if it's something we can share with others?
 Wouldn't that be the best Christmas gift we could ever give?

And don't we all want Christmas to be about more than just us?

Isn't this why we adopt angels off a giving tree,
 Or stock the Blessing Box full of food?
 We all want Christmas hope, love, joy, and peace to be ***bigger than us, right?***
 We all want others to know God's comfort, and hope!

That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction....

Our God comforts us.....

So that we can comfort one another!

The opening of Handel's *Messiah*
is something we can **look for** this Christmas.
More than any gift under the tree.
It's something we can **count on**.
More than friends or family.

For God has promised it—through the **prophets**,
and through his **Son**, our Savior Jesus Christ.
It is the very thing, **the COMFORT** that can carry us through the darkest times.

Friends, hear the **Good News of the Gospel** today:
May we look for, and **receive** God's comfort and hope,
And then **pass it on** this Christmas.
Amen.