

Sometimes you just need some comfort. Sometimes life become so stressful, so overwhelming that you just need some relief. What do you do for comfort when you really need a break from life's struggles? In the wintertime, a nice warm sweater can help bring a sense of coziness on an otherwise cold, bitter day. A favorite blanket or soft pillow can give a sense of warmth and satisfaction when you come in from the cold or after a long day's work. Kids and even some adults love cuddling up with a stuffed animal for comfort!

Have you ever heard of comfort food? Comfort food varies from person to person. Comfort food is something we like to eat that helps cheer us up when we are feeling sad or calms us down when we are feeling anxious. Do you have any comfort foods? That is a favorite snack or meal that helps to make you feel better?

Maybe it's taking a long warm shower or bath. Some people call that a "water hug". Maybe listening to music is what helps to soothe you when you're feeling weary. Hugs are usually a wonderful way to help restore your sense of well-being.

In recent years organizations like Lutheran Church Charities sponsor a service where specially trained dogs are brought into areas where "comfort" is needed. They have been brought to places where there has been a tornado, hurricane, or other natural disaster. They have been brought into schools, churches, and other places where children and adults are sad, scared or otherwise in need of emotional support. What is it that helps you the most when you are in need of comfort?

In our Old Testament lesson today, the people of Israel needed comfort that no animal or even any human source like food or a sweater could provide. Israel would face challenges from foreign kings who would come and conquer the land with their armies and ultimately take many of the people as captives.

In the previous chapter (Isaiah 39), Judah's King Hezekiah is warned, "The days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon" (Is. 39:6). As prisoners, they would be away from their families and friends in a foreign land. They would be very lonely. They would need comfort. More challenging than their political position was their *spiritual* condition. Israel had given into the temptation to worship idols. There was no escaping the judgment of the just God. No comfort food, water hugs, people hugs, sweaters, or dogs could comfort them.

Yet to those who are captive to sin; to those who are afflicted in the hearts because of their sin, Isaiah speaks a word of comfort from God, “Comfort, comfort my people ... speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... that her iniquity is pardoned” (Is. 40:1). Isaiah again shares the Advent promise that the Savior will come. Through His suffering and death, the Savior would take away the sin (iniquity) of Israel and the world. They would be comforted in believing that God was with them, and that He would rescue them. God would bring them back to their homeland again.

These uplifting words were especially encouraging for the people of Israel during the lowest point in their nation’s history. The towns of Israel were destroyed along with Jerusalem and the temple. This meant that the presence of the Lord and His loving kindness and forgiveness was no longer present among God’s people. But all that was about to change.

“Comfort, comfort!” The Lord repeats himself. Comfort is a Gospel word, and once is never enough with the Gospel. The Gospel is always more; more than we expect and more than we deserve. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem” (v 1). Freedom comes through the word, through the comforting, tenderly spoken words that her “warfare is ended,” that soon her captivity in Babylon will be over. The words of liberation are not a command to organize an army of freedom fighters or terrorists to fill the streets of Babylon with innocent blood. Rather, the words of comfort deal with the deeper warfare and spiritual captivity of sin and death. “Proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.” (vv. 1–2). Double comfort (v 1) is the language of the Gospel. Double gifts (v 2) from the Lord for all her sins is the Gospel language of forgiveness. It’s always more than we expect and more than we deserve, but always just what we need!

“Comfort, comfort” is *exactly* what *we* need. These uplifting words are especially encouraging for *us* not just when we are overwhelmed with life’s problems, or when our nerves are frazzled by the hectic pace of the holiday season, but most especially when we’re confronted by God’s holy Law and we realize our own inadequacies, our own sins, our own helplessness and hopelessness apart from God. That we deserve His just condemnation. This is just how the Israelites felt as captives, far away from God’s comforting presence. I like how Martin Luther once put it, “God’s people are those who need comfort because they have been wounded and terrified by the Law and they are an empty vessel capable of receiving comfort. *Only those who are afflicted have comfort and are capable of it, because comfort means nothing unless there is a malady*” (AE 17:3)

The Israelite captives languishing in Babylon knew full well their affliction and their malady. They had been wounded and terrified by God's holy Law. Because of their sins they were captives. Their cities had been destroyed and the glory of the Lord had left the temple back home in Jerusalem, but now Isaiah proclaims in verse five of our text:“(T)he glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” (v 5). And so, it happened that Israel *returned* after seventy years in captivity. And to the amazement of all the surrounding nations, the temple was rebuilt. Israel's worship there was nothing other than God's people gathered in His name, in His presence receiving mercy and forgiveness for their sins. What comfort!

If Israel and the nations living in the sixth century BC were amazed at how an insignificant little nation such as Israel could survive amid the rise and fall of superpowers like Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, the greater surprise would come years later when a baby boy was born in the insignificant, back-water town of Bethlehem to a young lady named Mary, who was in fact, a Virgin. This is the ultimate, the greatest meaning of Isaiah's prophecy: “And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.” This is the reason John writes in His Gospel: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (1:14).

This baby boy, the Word of God made flesh, is the very comfort *we need*. He is adequate for all our needs; better than any comfort food, cozy blanket, or anything else. He has come to bring us forgiveness and peace with God. He is our strong helper and our sure and certain hope.

Through the words of the prophet Isaiah, God brought comfort and hope for captive Israel. Their warfare, Israel's captivity was completed, not because of her good works and righteousness, but because of God's mercy—because of His gracious words of promise.

In the same way, *our* struggle in the captivity of sin and death is ended and completed, not because of our good works and righteousness, but because of what the baby boy of Bethlehem, Immanuel, would grow up to do on a mountain outside of the city of Jerusalem. “It is finished” (Jn 19:30) were His words as He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, your sins are atoned for. Life forever with God has been won! It is His gift to you which He gave you in your baptism and renews and strengthens it through His powerful Word and the Lord's Supper. Forgiveness, life, and salvation are His gifts, His presents to you!

And speaking of presents, Christmas Day is coming. Ready or not, it's coming. Our preparation won't make it come any sooner. It will come whether we're

prepared or not. Of course, we'll make preparations. During these next few days all across the country, Pastors, teachers, DCE's, church musicians, organists, choirs, altar guilds, custodians will put in extra hours. Families everywhere will also make preparations, including buying presents, cooking, organizing parties, and putting up decorations—all of which reflect the joy and thanksgiving that comes with such a wonderful celebration. Still, our preparations don't make Christmas come. We prepare and celebrate because Christ is coming. At the heart of our preparation is repentance, turning *from* our sins and turning *toward* God. The King is entering His holy city, just like Isaiah describes in our text. Our repentance does not cause Jesus, our King to come to us. God's gracious nature is the only reason for that. And when the King comes in great might, Isaiah changes the metaphor to reveal just what kind of King he will be—a King like no other. “He tends his flock like a *shepherd*: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young”. (v 11) And that is a most comforting promise!

Sometimes you just need some comfort. Sometimes you just need relief. And today you have it! It comes from the best source of all: Your God, Your King, your Good Shepherd! And His tender words to you this day as you wait for Him are these: “Comfort, Comfort, my people.” Your sins are forgiven! God is at peace with you and His comfort is for you, now and always! Amen!