

“Comfort, comfort, ye My people, Speak ye peace, thus saith our God” (*LSB* 347:1). I love that hymn! Some people think it’s a little slow. I think the tune so perfectly sets a mood of peace, serenity, quiet, which I really need at this busy time of year. It’s like a voice that gently lulls away anxiety: “Comfort, comfort, ye My people.” I think that hymn is the reason I love our text so much.

It's funny, though, every time I work on this text, something blows the mood. It’s like a bullhorn on the job site calling you back from lunch. It’s this other voice shouting, “Make way, make way! Comin’ through! Come on, move, move, move!” Actually, it’s the voice of John the Baptist, foretold by Isaiah the prophet, telling us to get up and get with it. Mood blown.

The prophet’s voice is supposed to open a new, comforting section of the whole Book of Isaiah. Chapters 1–39 are predominantly judgment, ending with a prophecy of the Babylonian captivity. Then chapters 40–66 are to be mainly a message of comfort. It begins well enough: “‘Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God. ‘Speak tenderly to Jerusalem’” (vv.1-2).

But then the prophet’s voice changes altogether and where’s the comfort in that voice? It’s as if a voice cries out that anything standing in God’s way will be bulldozed: “³ “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 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”(vv 3–5).

Every valley and mountain shall be leveled, it says. In other words: “Get that earthmover in here! Get the blasting crew! We need some dynamite over here! Hurry up with those dozers!” That’s the voice we hear from Isaiah.

The text is a Hard-Hat Only area; huge tracts of land are being leveled. A highway’s going through. Picture the work on Highway 212 a couple of years back between Cologne and Chaska, but in a mountainous region! This highway’s not going around those mountains, either. It’s not going through the valleys. There aren’t going to *be* any more mountains or valleys.

You see, this highway is the Messiah coming, **God** on His way. He doesn’t reroute for anybody. Nothing can stand in His way—not solid granite peaks, not deep, steep ravines. If you’re in the way, you’re getting bulldozed.

This is why seven hundred years later John the Baptist came. “The Lord is coming!” John says. “Prepare!” In other words, “Repent!”

John wasn’t concerned about mountains being run over. He came to see that *people* didn’t get flattened. Lives that aren’t level, that are crooked, that

aren't perfectly in line with the rule of God's Law will be blasted away. When the heavy machinery comes rolling through, anyone with sin will not be an innocent victim. It's a powerful message and John the Baptist did not mince words. He told it like it is!

We all get excited about Christmas coming, about the Messiah being born . . . of course! But often the voices of the prophets **warn** about the Messiah's coming: "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire", the prophet Malachi says in chapter 3, verse 2 of his book. "Who can stand?", he asks.

Can someone whose words are thoughtless stand, who hurts the feelings of others? Can someone whose thoughts are selfish, greedy, or lustful stand when the Messiah appears? How about someone just standing around, indifferent to the King of the universe?

No obstacle will be allowed to stand in the Lord's way, Isaiah says, least of all sin. So, John cries out and Isaiah cries out: "Prepare! Repent!"

And that's what this season of the church year is all about. Advent is a time of repentance. A time to examine our hearts and our lives, and make sure we are ready for the Lord's second advent, His second coming.

When the Lord comes, anyone standing in sin will be bulldozed. "Comfort, comfort, My people." But where is the comfort in **that**, Isaiah? Where is the comfort in that, John? Where is the comfort in that voice?

Hear what else the voice has to say: "A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?"'" (v 6a). I'll tell you what it cries! A voice cries out that we have our own reasons to cry. It says: "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades" (vv 6b-8a).

Where's the comfort in that? What hopelessness! What helplessness! What desperation! We're all like grass clippings, the prophet says, grass clippings that are mown and thrown. . . just composting, rotting. Flowers, which are beautiful, perhaps, for a few days will soon become wilted, drooping, dead.

That's not a very optimistic outlook, Isaiah paints for us, is it? No, but if we're honest, we know it's accurate, don't we? Hair loss, wrinkles, a larger pants or dress size are constant reminders—we're fading already.

You know about feeling withered. How many days you get home from work or home from school and just want to head straight to bed or straight to the couch for a nap.

What's worse, things we try to accomplish often seem so futile. You spend years saving for retirement, then you lose the loved one you wanted to spend it all with. You think you've invested everything toward a loving, trusting relationship with your children, but something's broken down. You do all the right things to save yourself for your future spouse, prepare yourself for marriage, and then you start to wonder if anybody's going to come along for you.

A voice cries out: "The grass withers, the flower fades." Where's the comfort in that? Well, the truth is, if that's the way we see ourselves—as flowers, as grass—then there *is* comfort in the voice of Isaiah and the voice of John. Because we *are* so helpless, it is *very* comforting to hear the voice of our God so strong, clear, irresistible! "The grass withers, the flower fades, *but* the word of our God will stand forever" (v 8). Did you hear *that* voice? How did it sound?

"The word of our God stands *forever*." "The mouth of the LORD has spoken!" God's voice rings out as strong and clear and irresistible. When the herald announces that the Lord is coming, He comes! When the voice cries that every hill and valley will be leveled, nothing can resist him. How does *that* sound?

If we want to be big, tough, ruggedly independent, stand up to God or even stand up before God as we are—sin and all—if we're going to set ourselves up as mountains in God's way, then the last thing we want is a voice of God that's irresistible, that moves mountains.

Then we want a god with a wimpy voice we can ignore. We want a god with a voice that speaks wishes but not truths, a god whose threats and promises will probably never happen.

If that's the kind of voice we want to hear from God, then there's no comfort in the voice of Isaiah, or the voice of John, because the mouth of the Lord *has* spoken; the Word of our God **does** stand forever.

But if we realize that we really are grass, a flower that fades, then that's the very voice we want to hear. A voice that's strong, clear, irresistible, a voice whose promises will be accomplished, a voice that can give us the strength and certainty we lack. Hear that voice of the Lord: "9 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!"

¹⁰ Behold, the Lord GOD

comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ 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...Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² 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." (vv 9-11, 1-2).

Here is comfort! Not just a wish or a nice idea. Something that *is* going to happen. In fact, something that **has** happened. The Lord God has come, just as Isaiah knew, just as John proclaimed. "The mouth of the LORD has spoken . . . the word of our God stands."

Jesus has come, lived, died on the cross, risen from the grave. Our iniquity been pardoned, forgiven. That was John's message too for those who wanted to listen to the rest of it. Now the Messiah is gathering up His helpless lambs, holding us close to His heart. We could just as well say Jesus is carefully picking up the faded flowers, pressing them gently to a page to preserve and keep them forever.

We may be aging, fading, but in Christ we have eternal youth. We may feel withered, crashed, at the end of the day, but Christ always refreshes and renews us for another. We may think our dreams, our plans, and our families are coming to nothing, but Christ has plans for us **beyond** our wildest dreams.

When the voice of the Lord speaks these promises, nothing can resist him. No obstacle will prevent His doing all this for us. There's confidence in that strong, clear voice. Yes, there's comfort for withered, faded souls.

A voice that says: "Make way!" A voice that says: "You're grass." But, most of all, a voice of good tidings whose words will stand forever. Thanks be to God, a voice of comfort, yes, comfort for God's people.