

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**December 13, 2015**  
**Debbie Manning**  
**When Heaven Came Down: Messiah Who Comforts**  
**Isaiah 40:1-9**

Well, good morning everyone! I am Debbie Manning. I'm part of the Congregational Care Team here at CPC and we are in the third week of Advent. We're calling our series "The Nature of the Messiah—When Heaven Came Down." A couple of weeks ago Carrie Gleeson talked about the Messiah and Justice, and last week John talked about the Suffering Messiah. Today I'll be talking about Jesus the Comforter.

I have to tell you though, at my household when I preach, the whole week before we call it "Preach Week" and this is not said with a sense of excitement and anticipation. It's actually said with a bit of dread. And I'll tell you that if you walked into my home you would see the coffee table, the countertop, and the desk just covered with notes and books and commentaries. And something happens to me during Preach Week—I'm just not quite myself. All this time I thought it was sort of a joke, up until a few months ago. I was preparing to give a message at The Table, and Jake, my brand new son-in-law walked in the door and put a bottle of whiskey on our kitchen counter. He looked at my husband with what can only be described as deep sympathy, and he said, "Steve, this is for you. I heard it was Preach Week." So, you can only imagine what was going through the minds and hearts of my family when they heard I had to preach two weeks in a row in the middle of December. It wasn't pretty. But, by the grace of God, the text that I had to preach on at The Table last Sunday night, we do the Narrative Lectionary there, just happened to be the exact text I am preaching on today, so no Preach Week for the Manning's this week. I had that the week before, but I'm so glad to be here with you guys and I love Advent. I love the season of longing and expectation, and the excitement of Advent.

And for me, Advent always starts on the first Tuesday in December at the Candlelight Memorial service. About 250 people gather right here in this room—and there's candlelight and music—and together we remember the loved ones that we've lost. The beauty of the night, though, is that we stand in the pain and at the same time we hold on to the comfort of the coming Jesus. And with all that's been going on in our world and our communities this year, I feel a yearning for that kind of comfort more than ever. And it's that cry from those in exile, those that are experiencing injustice, persecution, or suffering that make us all just want to hang on tight to a God who hears our cries and offers us comforts.

About a year-and-a-half ago, my daughter Kate spent about five months in the country of Malta. Malta is a small country in the Mediterranean off the coast of Italy, fairly close

to Europe and not too far from North Africa. Three times a week while Kate was there, she and a group of other college students tutored asylum seekers in English. Asylum seekers, people who were waiting for refugee status. And these folks came from Northern Africa—from Somalia, Syria, Libya, Gambia—these were people who had fled their homes, left their families, and were trying to escape civil unrest and conflict. They were being persecuted and their lives were in danger. Kate sat each week, mostly with young men; there were just a few young women. And what was intended to be this time of teaching ended up being something far bigger, because as they got to know each other, the stories unfolded. And I'll tell you, the stories for a 20-year-old from Minnetonka, Minnesota were beyond anything she could have ever imagined. And they were stories of these people watching their family members and friends killed, fleeing for their lives, trekking through countries and navigating checkpoints at all the different borders, and at these checkpoints they were vulnerable people and they were being robbed, and abused, and raped.

Now, they were trying to get to Italy. They paid pretty much everything they owned to get on to these ill-equipped boats that often sunk. And if they were lucky, they got caught by the Maltese Coastguard. They were then put into detention centers that felt like prisons. Refugees . . . waiting in exile. Waiting for a new life, a second chance. Hoping to see their families again, hoping for some kind of future that might include peace and security. But in the middle of their exile, God brought His comfort through these college students who were scared and uncertain. They didn't know what they were doing, but they showed up, they listened, and they saw the humanity in each and every person they worked with. Unbeknownst to them, they brought God's comfort to people in exile. And that is exactly what our text today is about. God, the Comforter, is here, right now in the midst of wherever we are—personally, communally, globally. Whatever our exile looks like, no matter how distant God may feel from you, God is here and He not only responds to us with comfort, but He calls us to comfort others as well.

So, we're in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and we are in the book of Isaiah. And if you remember, Isaiah is a prophet; he was a visionary who revealed a God-centered way of living and seeing. We can look at the book of Isaiah in two parts. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, deals with Judah and God warning His people, over and over again, to repent from their unfaithful ways. Well, they don't respond and God sends them into exile. Now, what Isaiah does not describe is the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, but we know that happens in about 586 B.C. So, in chapter 39 of Isaiah, it's presumed that the exile is coming, and then in chapter 40 it's already happened. The second half of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40-66 (we call it Isaiah of exile) is where our text comes from tonight, and it speaks directly to the needs and despair of the people of Judah while they are in Babylonian exile.

## Isaiah 40:1-9

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and 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.

I want to pause for just a second because in chapter 40:1, the tone completely changes from the first half of the book of Isaiah. God is no longer coming to His people with warning and judgment. He’s speaking to people that have been in exile for about 100 years. People that have been experiencing misery, that are in despair because they’ve been traumatized by war and loss. God knew what His people needed and His first words to them after what seemed like a long period of silence were words of comfort, words spoken right to their heart.

## Isaiah 40:3

A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

So God uses this road construction metaphor to say that He is coming. God is coming. He’s coming to you, Judah. He’s coming to bring you out of exile. Prepare the way. Fix the road. And what Isaiah is telling the people of God is that preparing the way means preparing your heart. Get ready because God is coming. And in verse 6:

“A voice says, “Cry out.” And I said, “But, what shall I cry?” “All people are like grass, and all 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 withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever.” You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!”

This entire passage can be described in one word: comfort. This text is a word of tenderness spoken to people after a long, dark night of exile. And at issue is the situation of God’s people. Think about the misery! Stripped of everything familiar, their temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, and they’re under the oppressive rule of an enemy. As you can imagine, the people of Judah are discouraged, they’re depressed, and they’re suffering. And Isaiah’s message shows our humility, our frailty. He takes that and he contrasts that to God’s strength and to the word of our God that stands forever. God calls Isaiah to bring “good news.” Shout it out—God is here! And the good news that Isaiah is talking about is the saving work of God that is to come.

God knew His people’s pain and He responded. “Comfort, comfort my people.” But I don’t think comfort means a whole lot unless we’ve experienced exile. I think we all

have. What does it mean to be in exile? What does exile look like today? Maybe exile feels like persecution, isolation, loneliness—separation from God and from each other. For the most part, we don't freely choose to go into exile; it is forced upon us against our will. And yet, even in exile, God speaks words of comfort to us.

You know, I started with this story about my daughter, Kate, and her experience in Malta—I think that's the tip of the iceberg, right? We live in a time where the number of refugees has sent our world into a crisis. People in places like Syria, Iraq, Africa, and Mexico—to name a few—continue to flee persecution, flee for their lives. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to His people:

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and all people shall see the glory of the Lord together.”

Racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, even being single can exile people from community and a sense of belonging. Yet God speaks to His people. Extreme poverty exiles women, and children, and men. And poverty like that, the emotional and spiritual exile of that kind of poverty feels awful. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to His people.

“The uneven ground shall become level, the rough places a plain. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

And what about grief? We don't choose grief, do we? Grief chooses us when we experience a loss. A broken relationship can exile us from all those interconnected relationships. A loss of job and career, a loss of a dream can throw us into exile. And when a loved one dies, grief can exile us from others, exile us from our normal routine, our daily lives . . . they look different. They feel uncertain. And exile certainly can be identified by isolation and loneliness, and grief often leads us there. And yet, even in exile, God speaks to us:

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

In our most hopeless moment, our most challenging times, our greatest feelings of exile, God comforts us, He never leaves us.

“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms, and carry them close to His heart, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

The message here is twofold: God's comfort for us and a call for us to comfort others. We can hang on tight to the comfort God gives us, but just like God commissioned Isaiah, He commissions us today to comfort others with the comfort that we ourselves have experienced from God. And significant in this text is Isaiah's question to God, “What shall I cry?” And God's answer, “Lift up your voice and shout ‘Here is your God!’” Every time we love other people in exile, we bring God's comfort.

When people from this community were down at the 4<sup>th</sup> precinct for weeks on end, praying with people that were hurting, they were saying, “Here is your God!” And when

we prepare meals down at Calvary, or Young Life, or at Loaves and Fishes, we are stating, “Here is your God!” And when we walk alongside young moms and we mentor them and we love them up, we are claiming, “Here is your God!” And when we fill those bins out there with all of those gifts for the Joy of Giving, we are shouting, “Here is your God!” And when our Student Ministries walk alongside our teenagers, our middle schoolers, our high schoolers, as they navigate their own kind of exile, they are showing them, “Here is your God!” And when a sister who finds out a few weeks ago on a Wednesday that her cancer has come roaring back, and on a Thursday she tells her principal, and on a Friday she returns to school to find out that all the teachers had thrown in their sick days so she could do her chemotherapy, that is a chorus of people singing, “Here is your God!” That’s how God shows His comfort to us.

And here’s the thing, we will all experience pain and suffering, we will all spend time in exile, and we can receive the comfort that God promises us and in turn, we can comfort other people. Will you be that voice in the wilderness?

I often put this verse up here when I preach because it’s the verse that’s the foundation for our Lay Care Ministries: 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says,

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

[An interview occurs during this time in the sermon. To watch the interview, please go to <http://livestream.com/cpc/events/4577840/videos/106951784>. The interview occurs at 49:05.]

Messiah, the Comforter. The word of God that Isaiah spoke about is the word from the same God who became flesh in Jesus. That’s what we anticipate, that’s what we long for, that’s what Advent is about—we all need Jesus. I pray for you all that you can experience God’s comfort and that in turn you can take that comfort and love other people. Go in peace.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*