

Isaiah 40:1-11
Comfort, Comfort, O My People
WRCoB 6.18.23

We assume we know the meaning of the word prophet.

We think a prophet is a glorified fortune-teller
Someone who looks into a glass globe
And tells the people their future!

But that's not really a prophet in the Biblical sense.

A prophet is simply a spokesperson for God
A forth-teller, not a foreteller.

They have the courage to speak on behalf of God
The Lord and Creator of our Universe.

It is not an easy task and consequently

They tend to be in-your-face
Edgy, snarky, cynical
Irritable and irritating.

Frederick Buechner states there is no Biblical evidence
That anyone ever asked a prophet over for supper
More than once.

A prophet doesn't have to look into the future
To know what's happening.

The present circumstances are all they need
To see the nation is headed in the wrong direction

Being a prophet requires some God-given qualifications.

1. **Prophets set set-apart** Like a pastor or pastor's wife, people treat you differently.

2. **Prophets are called to the work of prophecy** one doesn't choose to be a prophet for profit, prestige, or power.
3. **Prophets have a hard time keeping their mouth shut.** This needs no elaboration.

They try hard to be thick-skinned about it all
But since nobody likes them and tells them so
They become bitter and lonely.

From Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Micah
Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zechariah
And John the Baptist.

They are compelled to tell it like it is.

As a result, they are chastised, beaten, and imprisoned
And in the case of John the Baptist, beheaded.

The burning within them to warn the world
Of the coming of the Lord
Overcomes any sense of self-preservation.

The other special qualification prophets have, oddly enough
Is that they truly love God
They truly love people
And they truly want what's best.

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For the nations of Judah and Israel, the worst has come

The cities are sacked
The communities destroyed
The crops are burned

The people are forced to leave their homes
To become exiles in a foreign land.

All that Isaiah prophesied came to be.

And the people grieved.

**Psalm 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon-there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered Zion.**

Along with Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah
Isaiah saw it coming

They warned the people to change their ways
While they still had a chance.

But it was too late!

They now found themselves as an oppressed people
Living as refugees in a foreign land
Longing for their homeland

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But when we come to chapter 40
All of a sudden, a change in tone and message.

Whereas before Isaiah preached gloom and doom
Pleading and coaxing the people to repent
Before they face imminent destruction

He now speaks words of comfort.

That even in the midst of despair
Even in the midst of their pain and suffering

Even though it is still a long way off
God was preparing for their redemption.

They had suffered enough
They have paid for their iniquities
They have served their time.

Now, Isaiah says, take comfort
Prepare the way for the Lord.

Move out of the way, God is about to do something.

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The word, comfort, is an interesting word.

Not so much in the way we use the word
But in its original definitions.

Let me give you some background.

The OT's original language was Hebrew.

But around the 3rd Century BC
When the Greek language became dominant
A Greek version of the OT was created.

It is called the Septuagint.

In the Septuagint the word for comfort is paraclete.

Have you heard that word before?

It is the same word used for the Holy Spirit.

For instance, when Jesus was preparing to leave this world
He promised he would send for another.

John 14:16 (KJV)

16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another COMFORTER, that he may abide with you for ever.

This word "comforter" is the Greek word paraclete.

It can also be translated as advocate, helper, or friend.

But what is truly enlightening
Is when you break the word down even further

Literally, the Greek word paraklētos means “someone who is called to come alongside someone else” (Ligonier).

What is even more interesting, well, to me anyway
Is that the initial use of the word
Was for a lawyer

When in need, one would call for a *paraclete*
To assist them through whatever trouble they were in.

Jesus comes along and promises the Holy Spirit
The *paraclete* as God who walks alongside us.

Comfort, comfort my people
Says your God.

Isn't that the whole point of the Incarnation?

That God came alongside of us
Not just in Spirit but in flesh and blood?

Immanuel, means specifically that . . . “God with us.”

God in Jesus comes to us as *paraclete*
The one who walks alongside.

And by doing so
As he said 2500 years ago
Through the prophet Isaiah

God promises comfort to all who look to him
In the midst of trouble

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I don't know about you
But when I find myself in difficult moments

It helps to have someone who will walk with me through it.

Their presence is “comforting”.

And I don’t know about you
 But it is not so much the words they speak
 Or the advice they give
 Or anything like that.

It is their presence I find comfort in.

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I don’t know about you
 But when I come upon someone suffering
 It’s hard to know what to say
 That might be comforting.

Seriously, sometimes what we say sounds so cliché?

But I am learning . . . and I say learning
 Because I’m one that likes to talk

That if I can’t find any words that offer comfort
 It’s better not to say anything but just to be present.

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Ray and Judy Williamson's son, David,
 Was killed in a fall during a hike.

They were overwhelmed with grief.

At the funeral home what they remember most
 Wasn’t the words people spoke
 It was how they made them feel.

Ray says,

“I used to wonder if I should go to the funeral home, when somebody had a tragedy because I always felt so awkward and didn't know what to say.

But I'll never ask again. I'll always go. It's not what you say but your presence that makes the difference."

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The Apostle Paul talks about this.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 CEV Praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! The Father is a merciful God, who always gives us comfort. ⁴He comforts us when we are in trouble, so that we can share this same comfort with others in trouble.

God is the ultimate source of comfort.

And as we find comfort in God's presence

We are to be a comfort to others.

By walking alongside of them.

As I said, walking alongside of someone is different

Than trying to find words of comfort.

Sometimes in the midst of suffering

Words just don't cut it.

- It's going to be all right.
- God going to heal you
- You're a strong person
- You can get through this

In the midst of pain and suffering that's not very comforting

Walking alongside of someone

Is different than talking alongside of someone.

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Leonard Sweet shares the following story.

"Today I visited an eight-year-old girl dying of cancer

Her body disfigured by her disease and its treatment.

She was in constant pain.

As I entered her room

I was overcome immediately by her suffering
So unjust, unfair, unreasonable.

Even more overpowering, though

Was the presence of her grandmother.

She was lying in bed beside her

With her huge body
Embracing this precious, inhuman suffering.

I stood in awe, for I knew I was on holy ground.

The suffering of innocent children is horrifying beyond words.

I will never forget the great gentle arms

And body of this grandmother.

She never spoke while I was there.

She was holding and participating in suffering

That she could not relieve.

But somehow her silent presence was relieving it.

No words could express the magnitude of her love.

(Leonard Sweet, Postmodern Pilgrims (Broadman & Holman, 2000), p. 16)

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Brothers and Sisters

Such is the love of God in Christ Jesus

Who holds us and participates in our suffering

Who willingly enters the human condition.

Who silently walks beside us.

Take comfort . . . It is Christ our Savior who comes.

He speaks tenderly

He tells us our hard service is over
Our iniquities pardoned.

Jesus, the Incarnate . . .

Born to save

Born to suffer

Born to be Immanuel, God with us.

Revelation 22:20 NRSV The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!