

# Second Sunday of Advent

## THE WORD THAT STANDS FOREVER

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

40Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2Speak 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.

3A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4Every 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. 5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." 6A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

9Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11He 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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Withering Word

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *No Righteousness***

It was not by accident that Israel was in the miserable situation they were in. God had spoken through the prophets, making it clear that what God wanted was righteousness and justice. Instead, the people produced shallow religion (lots of religious festivals; lots of religious talk; religion that offered comfort without any need for repentance; see Isaiah 1) and oppression (the rich “grinding the face of the poor”; see Isaiah 3). On top of that, the people (meaning the religious leadership in particular) mocked the prophets who spoke divine word. (See how they treated Second Isaiah’s namesake in chapter 28.)

Shallow religion is as commonplace now as it was then. “Keep Christ in Christmas,” we may urge others, but sometimes our lives make it impossible for others to see Christ in us. In addition, one does not need to look far to find grinding poverty in our society, to say nothing of the rest of the world. (And how can any of us claim that we are not participants in the grinding?)

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *No Trust in YHWH***

In previous chapters, Isaiah had identified the source of all this superficial religion and all this taking advantage of the poor: Israel was trusting in “other” gods (45:6). They idolized prosperity and security. They acted as if their hope lay in having wealth and being strong militarily. That’s why they blended pagan fertility religion with Temple worship. That’s why they tried to get rich at the expense of one another. And that’s why they were so intrigued with military alliances, particularly with Egypt. (See Isaiah 28-32.)

“Other” gods are popular still, are they not?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Life***

The trouble is, if we insist on having these “other” gods, the only God who is truly God will hold us accountable. Isaiah called it the Day of the Lord. (See Isaiah 2.) It’s not anything to look forward to if one’s god is not YHWH.

Why should we expect anything different if we opt for other gods? Why should God not speak to us and say, “If you *insist* on having other gods, then *have* them! And you will see just how far your trust in prosperity and power will get you!” God spoke that word to Judah when they insisted on trusting in other gods. The result was exile. The nation perished and the people withered. That’s what happens when God speaks words of judgment. People wither and nations perish. Why should God not let *us* experience the breath that God uses to speak those words? Given our rebellious trust in “other” gods, what is there to keep God from causing *us* to wither and perish—forever?

## **PROGNOSIS: The Good Tidings Word**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Given New Life***

What is there indeed, except that the same God whose word resulted in exile for a rebellious people also has another word for sinners besides a word of judgment. “Comfort my people,” the voice says. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, ...” For Israel, those instructions to the prophet meant that God was about to bring their exile to an end.

For us, those instructions to the prophet remind us that God has spoken this Word not just to Israel, but to the whole creation. It is the word that God prefers for us to hear even over God’s own word of judgment. It is the Promise God makes to us through Jesus, the Word of our God that “will stand forever.” It is the promise of pardon for our rebellion. It is the promise of

forgiveness, even for the sin that's at the root of all our sins, i.e., the sin of trusting in other gods. For embracing us so fully (i.e. embracing our sin that is such an inseparable element of who we are) and offering us forgiveness, Jesus took on accountability for our rebellious trusting in other gods. And it cost him his life, as rebellion against the source of life does. What good tidings to hear, that God is willing to go to such lengths to promise us pardon.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) :** *Trusting the Word that Gives New Life*

When God gets that word through to us so that we trust it, we find ourselves giving up our trust in those “other gods,” the gods of prosperity and power—at least for a while. And we find ourselves trusting instead in the Promise of the one God who alone is God. We find ourselves trusting the Promise that “he will feed [us] like a shepherd” and that “he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry [us] in his bosom...” And we find ourselves freed from believing that we need to sacrifice ourselves (or others) to the gods of prosperity and power in order to live.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *Living a New Life*

Operating with that trust, we find ourselves not only comforted, but also made bold with a boldness that causes us to “lift up our voice and not be afraid.” (v. 9) Instead of participating in superficial religion and living in ways that grind the faces of the poor, we find ourselves lifting up our voices on behalf of the poor and giving up practices that keep them in poverty. We also find ourselves getting ourselves up to the “highest mountain” we can to herald the good tidings not only of God's justice, but also of God's forgiveness in Christ—good tidings that continue to bring comfort to sinners.