

Comfort and Peace

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

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Isaiah 40:1-11

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

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

Get 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!" See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He 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.

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

who will prepare your way;

the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight,'"

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

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"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

“Ev’ry valley shall be exalted, and ev’ry mountain and hill made low: the crooked straight and the rough places plain:”

“And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”ⁱ

These opening lyrics of the famous and beloved *Handel’s Messiah*, prepare us for the whole story ahead, from the preparation and awaiting the birth of the Messiah as Isaiah’s prophecy of salvation, and on through Jesus’ nativity, passion, resurrection and ascension in moving words and powerful, beautiful, soaring, heart-tugging music. It all begins with God’s promises as spoken by the prophets and ends with Christ’s glorification in heaven.

The incredible and majestic Christmas classic, which has even been termed ‘a rite of the Christmas season,’ is one of the most famous pieces of music to ever be written. It is so connected to George Frideric Handel, that ‘*Handel’s Messiah*’, is often said as though it were a single word.

Yet the lyrics are not Handel’s own words. They are King James Scripture Old and New Testament texts arranged by Handel’s friend, Charles Jennens. The early 1700’s was a time of increasing secularism and humanism in England. Jennens was a passionate evangelical believer and a member of the ‘Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.’ He believed that by putting the gospel to music it would communicate its truth beyond intellectual knowledge and immerse it at a deep heart level. Once he completed all that he gathered and had written down, Jennens brought his work to his friend, the composer George Handel.

But for 18 long months the words sat on Handel’s shelf gathering dust until one day he decided to take it down. Handel dusted it off, and in three intense, immersive weeks, he remained shut up in his flat on Brook Street in London where he composed the music that made the words come alive. In those few weeks he barely ate, he barely slept, as he was utterly and completely immersed in the creation of this music. When he got to the Hallelujah chorus, his assistant found him in tears, saying, “I think I did see heaven open, and the very face of God.”ⁱⁱ

Handel’s *Messiah* indeed captures the deep emotion of the story of our redemption, of our forgiveness, our healing, our hope. It is the soundtrack of our longing for comfort and peace.

Yet the way for Handel was prepared by the almost forgotten, easily overlooked, English landowner and patron of the arts Charles Jennens. It was his work and his faithful passion that prepared the way for Handel’s *Messiah*.

The one who prepares the way sets the stage, sets the tone, opens a path for what, for who, is coming. It is the yeoman’s work of boldly breaking open something completely new, and it is not done for glory or fame or recognition, but from a calling and a commitment.

Jennens faithful evangelical task prepared the way for Handel to create some of the most beautiful music the world has ever known, and may perhaps ever know. His idea and his work led to the story of the anticipation, the life, the ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to be known and believed by others worldwide for centuries now.

The prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, Emmanuel, God Incarnate.

Through Isaiah God offers comfort. Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. The comfort that Isaiah is talking about is an overwhelming truth that surpasses the feeling of having “enough,” his comfort is the comfort of our God, who lives deep in our lives, even when we don’t think about it, even if we may not believe it, even if our fear blinds us to that presence.

The prophet goes on to explain what the truth of God will do for us. Valleys will be raised up, mountains will be laid low, as the coming of the Lord will level the way for all people to see God's glory and share in God's goodness. Instead of struggling over the rocky wilderness paths up into the mountains and down across arid deserts, the people will have a safe highway, broad and smooth. Even in life's most difficult moments, God leads the soul along that safe, broad highway.ⁱⁱⁱ

John prepared the way, proclaiming a baptism of repentance, inviting people to a whole new way of thinking and living, as he made the path straight for the One so powerful John would not feel worthy enough to stoop down to untie the thong of his sandals. There had been hope and expectation of a Messiah for centuries, and now the way is being prepared as the Messiah is soon on his way. Be ready. Be ready heart, mind and soul.

Quoting Isaiah, John the Baptist is still preparing the way for us, calling us in this and each Advent season, as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

The Messiah is now on his way. Be ready. Be ready heart, mind and soul. Isaiah and John have prepared our way, now it is our turn in this Advent season of waiting and preparing, to make the path straight in our own lives. What is happening in your own life that is contrary to the path to Christ? Is it something that calls for a small re-direction onto the right path, or a more radical change to even out the path? As John did for our faith ancestors at the Jordan River, he does for us today, leading us to find comfort and peace when we can turn away from all that is destructive to our relationship with God.

"Comfort, comfort, now my people, tell of peace!" so says our God.^{iv} Amen.

ⁱ <https://haventoday.org/blog/handels-messiah-lyrics-verse-references/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/classical-features/handel-messiah/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/finding-comfort-vs-being-comfortable-advent-2-b-2014/>

^{iv} Opening words of *Comfort, Comfort, Now My People* by Johannes G. Olearius