Prepare the Way of the Lord

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Y. Joe Kim

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 2 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. 3 A voice cries out:
'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 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it
together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.' 6 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. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD
blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever. 9 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!' 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. 11 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.

1. My Grandma's Death

Many of us have moments in life where we remember a particularly sad moment. What is that sad moment for you? For me, a sad moment that I remember is of an elderly woman in my neighborhood who passed away when I was five years old. Since my grandparents passed away before I was born I enjoyed talking with her and spending my time with her. I would call her grandma. At the time, I was too young to go to school. But I loved school. I don't remember the exact year, but I still remember the day, October 10. My older brother's school had a fall festival, and I wanted to go and see the festival. My parents had to work, so my mother asked if the elderly woman could take me to the festival.

The grandma took me and took care of me all day. It was one of the happiest days of my life. I remember coming home and telling my mother how much fun we had at the festival. The next morning, I woke up early because I heard someone crying behind my house. I asked my mother and learned that the grandma had passed away. I remember being devastated that morning. I could not eat anything and kept crying. I asked myself, what does it mean to die?

2. "Comfort, O Comfort."

In that moment, I wished I could have heard the words from Isaiah 40:1 and 2 from today's scripture. The scripture says, "***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***."

There are three verbs in these verses "comfort," "speak," and "cry" that are imperatives. God tells the prophet Isaiah what to say to the Israelites. God indicates God as "your God" and calls the Israelites "my people." In this, God explains that His relationship with Israel is special. Although they were deeply afflicted, God affirms that Israel would not be cast off. God is full of compassion for His people and reiterates to Isaiah that His mission is to comfort God's people.

The term "to comfort" in this context does not simply mean to encourage or strengthen. But it means to show the gentleness of a mother for her child. Isaiah 66:13 says, "***As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem***." God ensures Israel that they will be comforted not in Babylon, but in Jerusalem, the mother-city for the Israelites. For the people, the city of Jerusalem would have reminded them of God's presence among them. Here God assures His people that they are not forgotten and promises their return to their home town.

In verse 2, to comfort is amplified by "speak tenderly." This term literally means 'speak to the heart.' The words show the care of the speaker. The phrase "double for all her sins" means that according to the rule under the Law, the one whom God condemns is supposed to pay double to the other (Exodus 22:9). What Isaiah says here is that their sins have been punished enough so that they do not need to fear further vengeance.

3. Prepare the Way

Verses 3 through 5 explain how to comfort God's people: "***A voice cries out: '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***. ***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 person calls for the preparing of a highway because God will rescue the Israelites and bring them from Babylon to Jerusalem. The term "prepare the way" means to remove obstacles so that the Lord can come quickly and save them as soon as possible. In Matthew 3:3, John the Baptist cites Isaiah 40:3 & 4 and challenges the people to prepare for the coming Messiah. Gospel writers think that John the Baptist is the voice that cries out in the wilderness and is understood to be the one who fulfills God's prophecy found in Isaiah 40.

John the Baptist proclaims, "***Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near***" (Matt. 3:2). It is very interesting to notice that the meanings of preparation in Isaiah and in the Gospel of Matthew are quite different. In Isaiah, to prepare the way means to remove all kinds of obstacles in the wilderness to make the highway straight. However, in Matthew's gospel to prepare the way means to get ready the hearts of God's people.

4. The Lord is Coming

Although the meanings are different, the good news from both the texts is that the Lord is coming to bring them to go back to their home land. The news was too good to believe. It had been almost 70 years since the Israelites began living in exile. Babylonians would make fun of the Israelites, asking where their God was. Many of the first-generation Israelites had already died. The remnants prayed for their return to Jerusalem for a long time. Some of them had given up on their dream of return because the return seemed impossible. Some married Babylonians and settled in the foreign land.

When the Israelites began to lose hope, they heard the wonderful news that the Lord would come and deliver them from Babylon. They were excited and grateful for God's unfailing love and his faithfulness. Their joy is found in Psalm 126. "***When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.*** [2] ***Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'*** [3] ***The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced***." God's promises were fulfilled in 539 B.C. Yet God's promises before they were fulfilled were too good to believe.

5. God's Word Will Stand Forever

In verses 6 and the following, the prophet Isaiah contrasts the perishable nature of man with the unchangeableness of God. The point of the comparison is that although all people are like the grass and the flowers that wither and fade, "***The word of our God will stand forever***" (verse 8). Therefore, God's promises will be fulfilled. The sureness of God's promises is what gave the Israelites true comfort.

In verses 9 through 11, Isaiah says the time of Israel's restoration has drawn near. God's promises are now on the verge of being accomplished. Isaiah invites the people to join him in proclaiming the good tidings. "***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!***'" (verse 9). Isaiah says that God would be like a shepherd. "***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***" (verse 11). In the New Testament, the coming of God is

interpreted as the coming of the Messiah. God would send someone who would be like a good shepherd. Jesus says in John 10:11, "***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep***." What Jesus says here explains why he died on the cross.

6. Conclusion

Advent is the season we wait for the return of Jesus Christ. We are waiting for his 2nd coming. Early Christians believed that Jesus would return before they died. At the end of the Book of Revelation Jesus says, "'***Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus***" (22:20). Christians responded. The early Christians had a sense of urgency. They tried to be prepared to meet Jesus again. Are we ready to meet the Lord? Are our spouses, our children, our grandchildren, great grandchildren, and our neighbors ready to meet Jesus?

Last Thursday, December 7 was the 76th national Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day. The Pearl Harbor attack began on December 7, 1941 before 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Hundreds of Japanese planes swooped in on U.S. warships in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. About 20 U.S. naval vessels and 300 aircraft damaged or destroyed and more than 2,400 Americans were killed, and about 1,000 were wounded. Were the leaders of American military prepared for this attack? Perhaps not. Whatever we do, being prepared is very crucial.

7. Application

How are we prepared for Christmas? Many of us send Christmas cards, buy gifts and put decorations around the house. But the truest gift of Christmas is the good news of the Messiah coming to this world. There are so many people who search for the hope and true peace that they can find on earth. We are called to help them find what they are searching for. We can prepare the way of the Lord by helping others be comforted through God's grace.

I heard an amazing story last week. I think this video clip would explain what it means to help others be comforted. Kati Pohleer was abandoned in a market in China when she was three days old. She was later adopted by an American family. When Kati was 20, she discovered her birth parents had left her a note. The note says that they would meet her on a well-known bridge 10 or 20 years later. Her biological parents waited for her on the bridge every year on the same day when she was abandoned. She finally met her biological family by the help of her adoptive parents in Michigan. We can imagine how happy she and her biological parents were when they were reunited. I believe that becoming Christians is like a reunion with God, our spiritual parents. The Lord is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. God yearns to meet God's children and so He looks for someone who can help God's people be reunited with the Lord. Are we ready to help God's people be reunited with the Lord and be comforted? Amen.