



2

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-11

In this chapter, we will explore a cluster of Old and New Testament texts related to the mission of John the Baptist. Likely, you will not use all of these in preparing for the First Sunday of Advent; however, they will give you a framework for future messages for your congregation.

In this book, I will discuss passages from Isaiah for each of the four Sundays of Advent. Because of that, it is important that we begin with a general overview of Isaiah in its historical and literary context. The comments in this section will be important as you reflect on the specific texts for Advent.

The Historical Context of Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah received his prophecies during the latter reign of Judah's King Uzziah (called Azariah in 2 Kings 14:21) and the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. This period is described in the historical books of 2 Kings 14:21 - 20:21 and 2 Chronicles 26:1 - 32:33. These historical sections give you a larger lens through which to view Isaiah's ministry. The time frame from the beginning of Uzziah's reign to the death of Hezekiah was approximately 90 years (783 – 687 B.C.).

The years covered in Isaiah 1-39 reflect several historical factors:

1. Isaiah's ministry began in the year that Uzziah died, about 740 B.C. (see Isaiah 6). But we should remember the prophet was alive during the latter part of Uzziah's reign when the king was isolated due to

leprosy. Uzziah's son Jotham served as co-regent with his father during the leprosy years.²⁹

2. Isaiah was a "court prophet"; he had access to the king. Like any position of influence, a court prophet could be a genuine voice of God "speaking truth to power" or could be a sycophant for his/her own gain. Isaiah was a genuine prophet of God positioned to inform leadership of the ways of the Lord even if leadership refused to accept it. We will see this dynamic when we study Isaiah 7.³⁰
3. By the time of Isaiah, prophetic ministry was well established in Israel's history. The prophet Samuel was instrumental in the formation of the first dynasty of Saul and later in the second dynasty of David. In David's time, the role of court prophet was held by Nathan, who also served during part of the time of Solomon. The prophets Micah, Hosea, and Amos, were contemporaries of Isaiah, with Hosea and Amos directly addressing the spiritual rebellion of the Northern Kingdom. It is likely that Micah and Isaiah knew one another personally. They may also have known Hosea and Amos and their messages.
4. The Northern Kingdom rebelled against Jerusalem in 922 following the death of Solomon. The cause of this rebellion is described in 1 Kings 11:26 - 12:33. God raised up Elisha and Elijah as prophets who gave divine utterances as well as miracles in their witness to the Lord. These men prophesied in the ninth century (800s B.C.) and were forerunners of the written prophets in the eighth century (700s).
5. It is important to remember that when Old Testament prophets gave a word of the Lord to a king or situation, they were knowledgeable of the Torah, the written record of Moses found in Genesis through Deuteronomy. They were keenly aware of the Ten Commandments and the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27, 28. They were also aware of the political and economic forces shaping their environment. They were aware of history, and cognizant of God's perspective on such matters based upon the Torah. Thus, as prophets of God, they were keenly aware of their contemporary events/history and of what the Lord's purposes were for the sons and daughters of Abraham.
6. The Assyrian Empire is the primary political/military power during Isaiah's lifetime and is the international backdrop for Isaiah 1-39. This

empire rose to great prominence in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) and exerted its military and cultural influence almost everywhere east of the Mediterranean Sea.

7. The Northern Kingdom of ten tribes, usually called Israel, Ephraim, or Samaria, was conquered in 722 by the Assyrian King Sargon II. These tribes were scattered and lost their identity through the Assyrian policy of dispersing conquered peoples among other conquered peoples, diluting the ethnic, social, and religious connections that shaped permanent culture. In return, the Assyrians populated the territory of the Northern Kingdom with non-Israelite peoples. We will see this at work in Isaiah 9.
8. During the reign of Hezekiah, especially towards the end of his reign, Isaiah recognized the emergence of a new empire, the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians would conquer Assyria and lead to the defeat of Judah (the Southern Kingdom of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin) and the destruction of Solomon's Temple (Assyria was conquered 609 B.C., and Jerusalem was conquered in 586 B.C.; see Isaiah 39).

Tradition holds that Isaiah was martyred during the reign of Manasseh (687-642 B.C.). Hebrews 11:37 may be a reference to the way Isaiah died.

The Literary Framework of the book of Isaiah

The prophecy of Isaiah is composed of prose and poetry. Isaiah 1-39 is primarily poetry with prose where the prophet is describing specific episodes, and poetry comprises most of Isaiah 40-66. It has often been observed that the book falls into three sections: Isaiah 1-39 reflects events during the lifetime of Isaiah; Isaiah 40-55 indicate the period around 540 when the Persian king Cyrus granted the Jews in Babylon freedom to return to Jerusalem; and Isaiah 56-66 reflects the period about 520 after the return has occurred and the restoration in Judea is in progress.³¹

The literary structure leads to questions concerning the authorship of the entire book. It should be noted that copies of Isaiah 1-66 have been a unity since at least 200 B.C. It was a unity in the time of Jesus as evidenced by His quotation of Isaiah 61:1, 2 in Luke 4:18, 19. It was also a unity in the famous Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah.

I suggest the following approach to the literary issues related to Isaiah. First, there is little doubt that Isaiah 1-39 was composed by the prophet himself. Second, Isaiah's awareness of Babylon in Isaiah 13:1-22, 14:3-23, 21:9, as well as Isaiah 39, reveal that the prophet was not unaware that "the Holy One of Israel" was sovereign Lord over the nations and that nations rise and fall at His command.³² It is not unreasonable to assume a genuine "prophetic" vision about 700 B.C. enabling Isaiah to see the rise of Babylon as an Empire threatening Judah a hundred years later.

As mentioned above, the genuine Old Testament prophets were students of history and Deuteronomy. Isaiah's analysis of Judah's sins, plus his knowledge of the incorrigible corruption of Manasseh (687-642), gave the prophet insight into a time of judgment upon Judah just as judgment had come upon the Northern Kingdom in 722. The difference was that Isaiah recognized the certainty of the covenant God had made with Abraham and that Judah, the remnant, would not be totally destroyed as had occurred with the Northern Kingdom. Thus, the message of Isaiah 40-66 provided a prophetic hope to the exiled Judeans, and Isaiah was able to articulate that hope with great clarity and application. Thus, without doing violence to the text of Isaiah, we can view the book as a whole and still affirm the historical context of Isaiah 40-55 and 56-66.³³

FROM TEXT ...

Isaiah 40:1-11 - The historical situation of Isaiah 40 has been referenced in the previous section. That background is critical for understanding the whole book of this prophecy and for understanding much of the Old Testament and the background of the New Testament. Isaiah was probably in the latter years of his life when the content of Isaiah 40-66 was revealed to him. Likely the corruption of Manasseh was the historical event through which the Holy Spirit gave Isaiah the prophetic vision of the impending Babylonian conquest. The prophet discerned the magnitude of the destruction as an instrument of divine judgment. Thus, chapters 40-66 became a vision of comfort and hope to a people devastated by their own sinfulness and rebellion against "the Holy One of Israel."

Between Isaiah 39 and 40 is a period of approximately 115-162 years. Remember that the Lord extended Hezekiah's life 15 years, making Isaiah 38

about 702/701. While the exact date of the Babylonian visit in Isaiah 39 cannot be established, it likely occurred within a year or two of Hezekiah's recovery. It was 115 years from Hezekiah's recovery to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and 162 years from Hezekiah's recovery to the end of the exile, about 540/538.

Brueggemann called this time gap "a pause – a long pause."³⁴ Details of what occurred in that "long pause" are expressed in Ezekiel, Daniel, parts of Jeremiah and Lamentations, and Psalm 137.

With this background in mind, let's review the key portions of Isaiah 40. First, notice that the entire prophecy related to the exile begins with a double plural imperative *comfort*. It is a message to the remnant who have survived in Babylon. Remember, they have been there 70 years, and Jeremiah instructed the captives to make a new life there (Jeremiah 29:5, see also Jeremiah 25, 30, 31). But the prophetic word through Jeremiah (and Ezekiel) always contained the divine promise of restoration back to the land promised to Abraham.

The word *comfort* is the Hebrew *nacham* (נָחַם) and is used 17 times in 13 verses, including Isaiah 12:1; 22:4; 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12, 19; 52:9; 61:2; and 66:13. The double use is a Hebraic way of emphasis. The word conveys compassion and consolation. In this sense, the comfort means that Judah's "warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (40:2). This is not the comfort a pastor gives a grieving person over the loss of a loved one. This is the comfort that comes from knowing that judgment has come to an end. There is a price to be paid for sin. Yes, Jesus has paid that price on the Cross for our forgiveness, but all of us know there is a price in our own spirit and among our fellows. The analogy is one of a restoration process whereby Judah, in captivity, has faced her iniquity and returned to the mercies of God.

The *warfare* of 40:2 has been Judah's obstinate refusal to *amend* her ways in light of God's revealed law (Jeremiah 7:3). That rebellious spirit was ingrained deep in Judah's people. This is revealed in the word *iniquity* (*avon*, עָוֹן). It denotes perversity, a twisting of the inner self individually and corporately. It is the reality of our fallen nature as human beings. The only way to remove this corruption of the personal and national self is by the sanctifying blood of Jesus and the presence and power of the Word of God.

The use of *double* in verse 2 indicates that Judah's specific sinful acts against the divine law (*sins*) are forgiven, and her propensity for sinful acts (*iniquity*) have been *pardoned* (*ratsah*, רצֵה). To be pardoned means that God is pleased with something; He has been satisfied with what has occurred in Judah's heart through these 70 years. God evidenced a change in their collective spirit. That God deals with our double sinful condition of actual transgressions, as well as our fallen nature, is at the heart of the atonement in justification and sanctification. The hymn *Rock of Ages* by Augustus Toplady (1776) captures this reality: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee; let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed, be of sin the double cure; save from wrath and make me pure."

Toplady's hymn leads us to how God dealt with Judah's sin. God did it through His Suffering Servant, as described in Isaiah 53. In this sense, Judah herself is the suffering servant, though prophetically, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. Throughout Isaiah 53, the issue of *iniquity* is forefront (vv. 5, 6, 11) and the price paid by the Servant *pleased the Lord* (v. 10). It was God, through His Son Jesus, who paid the total price for our sins. It was God's holiness that had to be satisfied, a holiness that manifested itself in the reality of the fullness of love. God's holy love cannot be tolerant of sin. God's holy love often patiently withholds judgment and divine wrath for the sake of His holy name in order that the sinner may repent and enter the fullness of our destiny. But it is God who makes the provision for our forgiveness. Thus, it is *by grace we are saved* (Ephesians 2:5), and by grace, we are sanctified (Hebrews 2:10-13). This is why Isaiah 40:2 makes it clear that the pardon and the comfort are *from the Lord's hand*. Only God can deliver from the destruction of sin and restore Judah and us to His glory.

This is the framework for the key portions of Isaiah 40 that relate to the first Sunday of Advent. This price of restoration had to be paid in full for the future to be unfolded. God's gracious act of justification and sanctification is necessary for the preparation of the future God has in store for *My people* (v. 1).

I mentioned the double imperative plural of *comfort* in verse 1. There is a second plural imperative that begins verse 2 in the word *speak*. The content of this imperative is interesting. The NKJV reads to *speak comfort to Jerusalem*. Without question that is the intent, based on v. 1. But an

interesting change in language occurred with the Hebrew, usually translated *comfort* in verse 2. The Hebrew text and the Septuagint (LXX) read literally *speak upon or into the heart of Jerusalem*. The word in Hebrew is *leb* (לֵב) and *kardia* (καρδία) in the LXX and usually means *heart*.

There is a double reason why Isaiah used this word in 40:2: 1) the prophet wants to emphasize the depth of the comfort announced in 40:1 as going to the “heart of the matter” and bringing genuine *comfort* to the exiles; 2) the *heart* is the seat of the will, emotions, intentions and is the source of where the perversity of iniquity finds its origin. As Jeremiah 17:9 clearly states, “the heart (same word as in Isaiah 40:2) is deceitful above all things.” The message of the Lord to the exiles is that God is effectively dealing with their heart condition and the perversity that has alienated them from His presence and blessings.

Isaiah 40:3 begins with a singular voice crying in the wilderness that the deliverance is nigh and preparation must begin. As in the previous imperative verbs of *comfort* and *speak*, the announcement of *prepare* is plural. But interestingly, the focus of the preparation is not only on the exiles preparing themselves, but the preparation is for *the way of the Lord*. Just like Psalm 118:23, the exile is the Lord’s doing. It is the Lord’s possession that will leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem (remember the *My people* of 40:1). The references to the highway, valley, and mountain in verses 3 and 4 are metaphors indicating that nothing will interfere with this sovereign act of grace initiated from the heart of God.

Isaiah 40:5 places a dual emphasis on the *glory of the Lord* and *the mouth of the Lord has spoken*. God’s glory is more than radiance or something around the divine throne that glows. God’s glory is that what He wills, what He speaks, is accomplished. God’s glory is revealed to humanity through His righteous acts that are visible in human history. When God speaks, His will occurs and comes into being. This is the entire point of Genesis 1 and God’s speaking creation into existence. This is the point of *the Word made flesh* in John 1:1-14 and the glory of God being revealed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of the eternal Word, Jesus. That *all flesh shall see it* means that God’s revelation is not hidden from humanity. It is only our willful disobedience and pride that keep us from seeing what God has made plain (see the Apostle Paul’s arguments in Romans 1, 2 and 1 Corinthians 1:18 - 2:16).

The certainty of God's word is reinforced in Isaiah 40:6-8. It seemed impossible to the exiles' natural understanding that they could be restored. But the message of the one crying out is that *the word of our God stands forever*.

Isaiah 40:9-11 introduces us to the gospel. In Isaiah, it's the language of *good tidings*. In Hebrew, it's *basar* (בשר), and the LXX uses the participle form of *euangelizo* (ευαγγελιζω). Brueggemann captures the power of the *gospel* in these phrases, "*The news is that Yahweh has won, Babylon has lost, Judah is free.*"³⁵

New Testament Use of Isaiah 40

The four canonical Gospel writers include Isaiah 40:3 in connection to the ministry of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, as the forerunner who is preparing *the way of the Lord*.

1. Matthew 3:3 identified John the Baptist as the one that Isaiah foretold. John preached in the wilderness of Judea. There is some speculation that he was influenced by the community at Qumran. While direct connections are speculative, there is no doubt that the Jews in Qumran saw themselves as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.³⁶ John's message of preparing the way of the Lord was a message of repentance. While Isaiah 40 focused primarily on restoration, some 500 years after the exile John was anointed to call Israel back to genuine worship of God and be prepared for God to be among them personally through the Messiah. Another characteristic of John's preaching is to announce that the Messiah will baptize people with the Holy Spirit and fire (3:11).
2. Mark 1:2, 3 added Malachi 3:1, the last book of the Old Testament, to the Isaiah 40 citation. John the Baptist is not only the voice crying in the wilderness; he is the Lord's messenger who will prepare the Lord's way. Again, the focus is on repentance and being baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:4, 8).
3. Luke 3:1-17 included more contextual information than found in Matthew or Mark. Luke 3:1, 2 places John within the historical context of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod the tetrarch, and Annas and Caiaphas as high priests. In other words, the powers of the Ro-

man and Jewish worlds are identified. But, and this is a significant “but,” *the word of the Lord came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness*. For 400 years since the book of Malachi, there was an absence of the word of the Lord. But now, in John the Baptist, the Lord was speaking again clearly and definitively. Isaiah 40:3-5 is quoted with the LXX rendering of the end of Isaiah 40:5; *all flesh shall see the salvation of God*. The theme of repentance is presented more directly in Luke 3:7-14, and John’s message pointed to the Messiah, the Christ, and His baptism *with the Holy Spirit and fire* (3:16).

4. John 1:6-28 places greater emphasis on the fact that John the Baptist was not the Messiah but was the forerunner who announced the Messiah. In 1:19-23, Jewish leaders interrogated John about his identity. He made it clear that he is the one prophesied by Isaiah 40:3, *the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord*. The Gospel writer concluded this season by geographically placing John in the wilderness on the other side of the Jordan River.

... TO SERMON

A preacher could easily preach all four Advent Sundays just from Isaiah 40 and the preparation themes related to John the Baptist and Jesus. I suggest that as you develop preaching points, you keep a list of them that you can return to for preaching in the coming year. I encourage you to make certain that as you develop your message that you keep the coming of Jesus and preparation for His coming as a key theme. The gospel is the good tidings that bring hope to everyone living exiled from God. The good news is not Isaiah or John the Baptist. The good news is Jesus!

Having reminded you of the focus of preaching, let’s examine some of the ways you can develop Isaiah 40 and the Gospel passages cited earlier.

1. You can approach the congregation from the standpoint that there are people living in spiritual exile. Don’t assume that the “saints in the pew” are not battling their own temptations and even hidden rebellion against God. This is where you can speak about the distinction between sins and transgressions as specific acts of rebellion against God and the reality of our fallen nature as evidenced in the word *iniquity*.

uity. This message can focus on holiness and sanctification as a way of entering into Advent with a deeper sense of the Holy Spirit, preparing our hearts for what the Lord wants to do in and through us.

2. Using the first idea above, you can connect this to what John the Baptist said about the baptism of Jesus. Our Lord's baptism is with the Holy Spirit and fire. The idea of "holy fire" is a powerful theme of purity and consecration that can be emphasized in this sermon. This stands in sharp contrast to the public displays of lights and holiday themes that bring us some degree of joy but often do little to impact how we live. Jesus is the Light of the world, and His fire not only purifies but enables us to be seen as His faithful witnesses.
3. Another approach is to focus on the "speaking" and "Word of the Lord" in Isaiah 40:2, 8. This can be connected directly to John 1 and the emphasis on the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us. The power of the Word of God can be expanded upon in light of Hebrews 4:11-13. But as you focus on the Word, do not forget the remainder of Hebrews 4:14-16 which addresses how the Word works in our lives as Jesus enables us to *come boldly to the throne of grace*.
4. The theme of *good tidings, the gospel* found in Isaiah 40:9, can be connected to the message and ministry of Jesus in Mark 1:14, 15 about the content of the gospel: the kingdom of God. You should note that the *gospel* does not begin with the ministry of Jesus. The *gospel* has its roots throughout the Old Testament. Two New Testament writers refer to the *gospel* being preached in the era of the Old Covenant. Hebrews 4:2 indicates that the gospel was preached to the children of Israel while they wandered in the wilderness. They were the Israelites who refused to believe God's promise of provision. God's promises and provision were manifestations of *good tidings, the gospel*. 1 Peter 4:6 speaks of the gospel being preached to the dead, which is likely a reference to what Jesus was doing while in the grave (1 Peter 3:19ff). While Jesus' preaching of the gospel concerned the kingdom of God, the demonstration of God's righteousness in Jesus was seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).
5. The exegetical section dealing with Isaiah 40:2 puts some emphasis on the meaning of *iniquity* and that word in relation to holiness. You can approach this first Sunday of Advent "preparation" theme from the

side of holiness as a way of preparing the way of the Lord. Isaiah 35:8 refers to *the Highway of Holiness*. Later in 35:10, there is the familiar passage, *the ransomed of the LORD shall return, And come to Zion with singing, With everlasting joy on their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, And sorrow and sighing shall flee away*. Your preaching can focus on the restorative aspects of a sanctified life. That is the power of the Word and blood of Jesus transforming us into the image of Christ, who is the image of the glory of God.